

critique

FLANNERY O'CONNOR
J. F. POWERS

FALL, 1958

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critique studies in modern fiction

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Contents

FLANNERY O'CONNOR — J. F. POWERS ISSUE

	Page
Flannery O'Connor's <i>Wise Blood</i>	3
Caroline Gordon	
Flannery O'Connor: A Note on Literary Fashions	11
Louis D. Rubin, Jr.	
View From A Rock: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor and J. F. Powers	19
Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, O. S. F.	
The Complex Moral Vision of J. F. Powers	28
John P. Sisk	
J. F. Powers: On the Vitality of Disorder	41
George Scouffas	
Two Bibliographies: Flannery O'Connor J. F. Powers	59
George F. Wedge	

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* * * *

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Flannery O'Connor's WISE BLOOD

CAROLINE GORDON

The talent of Flannery O'Connor, one of the most original among younger American writers, was recognized soon after the publication of her first short stories. Her originality has been to some extent obscured by the resemblance of her work to the work of other American writers who belong, roughly, to the same literary generation.

This resemblance has been noted so often and so widely that it has come to be taken for granted; a critic recently asserted that if the name of the author were deleted it would be hard to tell a story by Miss O'Connor from a story by Truman Capote, Carson McCullers or Tennessee Williams.

Miss O'Connor's work does, indeed, resemble the work of some of her gifted contemporaries and the resemblance is not superficial. Their characters have what we might almost call a "family likeness." They often behave in the same way, talk the same way. (One may observe in passing that these writers are gifted with an exquisite ear for the common speech.)

Miss O'Connor's work, however, has a characteristic which does not occur in the work of any of her contemporaries. Its presence in everything she writes, coupled with her extraordinary talent, makes her, I suspect, one of the most important writers of our age.

We may be in a better position to define the nature of this characteristic if we first consider the resemblances between Miss O'Connor's work and the works to which it is most frequently compared. What, for instance, do *Wise Blood* and Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* have in common?

Marguerite Young says of Truman Capote: "His chief preoccupation is the everyday monstrous—modern Gothic; people who haunt or are haunted." Mr. Capote's hero, Joel Knox, an adolescent boy, sets out in search of his father and ends trapped in the same half-world in which his father lies paralyzed and all but

mindless. Mr. Capote's world is one of horror but it has its strange beauty: miasmic swamps where tiger lilies "the size of a man's head" glow above luminous sunken logs, a ruined hotel whose "swan stairs soft with mildewed carpet curve upward from the hotel's [long-deserted] lobby," a parlor with gold-colored curtains, tied with satin tassels, a love seat of lilac velvet, a cabinet gleaming with ivory figurines. And Joel himself is an attractive boy with large brown eyes and gold-brown hair.

Haze Motes, the Tennessee hill-billy who is the hero of *Wise Blood*, has eyes "the color of pecan shells," wears a suit of "glare-blue" and moves always in the harsh light of every day. But he, like Joel, bears one of the marks of a hero; he has set forth alone on a quest that may cost him his life. We see him first in a train, sitting "at a forward angle on the green plush seat, looking one minute at the window as if he might want to jump out of it." Haze was brought up strictly in the Tennessee hills by a mother who, whenever she punished him, which was often, did not fail to remind him that "Jesus died to redeem you." "I never ast him," Haze invariably mutters. While serving in World War Two he has lost whatever religious faith has survived his mother's whippings and is on his way to the town of Taulkinham on what he considers his life mission: the spreading of the gospel of "the Church of Christ Without Christ."

Like most fanatics, he eschews the pleasures of the senses, but he feels impelled to do anything which his "jesus" would disapprove of and, on the train, he copies down from the wall of a toilet the address of a prostitute:

Mrs. Leora Watts!

60 Buckley Road

The Friendliest Bed in Town!

Brother.

He lives with Mrs. Watts until he meets another woman who poses as a child and is the daughter of a supposedly blind itinerant street preacher.

Joel Knox has a girl friend, Idabel Tompkins, "[a] skinny girl with fiery, chopped-off red hair," who, when she is not swaggering about, accompanied by a flea-bitten hound, Henry, stands "dead still, her hands cocked on her hips." "Her face was flat, and rather impertinent; a network of big ugly freckles spanned her nose. Her eyes, squinty and bright green, moved swiftly from face to face,

but showed none a sign of recognition; they paused a cool instant on Joel, then traveled elsewhere."

Haze's girl, Sabbath Lily Hawks, wears "a black knitted cap, pulled down low on her forehead," with "a fringe of brown hair sticking out." She has "a long face and a short sharp nose" and her eyes, too, are remarkable, glittering like "two chips of green bottle glass."

On the surface the two young women much resemble each other. One is tempted to call them both freaks. And indeed, a good many critics have asserted that the worlds of both these writers are peopled almost exclusively by freaks. Joel Knox's cousin, Randolph, his cousin, Amy, the Negro woman, Missouri, her grandfather, Jesus Fever, are all twisted by life into shapes which show themselves as monstrous through the veiling of Mr. Capote's lush prose. Miss O'Connor writes lean, stripped, at times almost too flat-footed a prose, and her characters, as I have said, move always in the harsh glare of every day. But they, too, are warped and misshapen by life—in short, freaks. The difference between her work and that of her gifted contemporaries lies in the nature and the causes of their freakishness.

Idabel Tompkins is an appealing figure, in spite of her appearance and swaggering ways. Joel feels her attraction and tries to make love to her but the affair comes to nothing—she repulses him and in so doing gives him the final push towards the twilight world in which he will eventually take refuge.

The affair between Haze Motes and Sabbath Lily Hawks proceeds to a logical and more terrifying conclusion. Sabbath Lily is actually less prepossessing than Idabel. She differs from her in being fiercely womanly. She will go to almost any lengths to get her man and to even greater length to fulfil another womanly function, maternity. Haze yields to her blandishments partly as a way of proving his faith in the Church of Christ Without Christ. They set up housekeeping in a rented room. Haze's friend—or enemy—Enoch Emery, obeying a compulsive impulse, or, as he would put it, his "wise blood," steals a mummy from a city museum. He hears Haze preaching his gospel: "The Church Without Christ don't have a Jesus but it needs one! It needs a new Jesus"—and he rushes home, wraps the mummy up and deposits it at Haze's door. Haze is lying on the bed, a bandage over his eyes. Sabbath receives the bundle, unwraps it and after a few moments, during which her

face has "an empty look, as if she didn't know what she thought about him or didn't think anything," cradles him in her arms and begins to croon to him. The unholy family is now complete.

Miss O'Connor does not stop there but piles horror on horror. The idea of "a new jesus" catches on. A consumptive named Solace Layfield impersonates Haze, wearing the same white hat and "glare-blue" suit. Haze is struck by the resemblance to himself and stops his preaching long enough to listen to the new "prophet." He comes to the conclusion that Layfield actually believes in Jesus and is so enraged by what seems to him heresy that he runs the automobile which is his own pulpit over the prophet. The prophet forces Haze to listen to his dying confession. From that time forward Haze subjects his body to fierce mortifications, wears barbed wire twisted about his waist and fills his shoes with gravel and bits of broken glass. He finally loses his "pulpit." Two patrolmen decide that his rattle-trap old car is a menace to public safety and push it off the highway and down an embankment. In despair and, like Oedipus, unable to look at what is before his eyes, Haze blinds himself.

In comparison with *Wise Blood*, *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* reads like a case history. The reader may feel distress when Joel Knox, abandoned by the maternal, middle-aged woman who is his only remaining link with reality, descends into the twilight world of Scully's Landing, but Mr. Capote merely tells us what happened. No moral judgment is implied and there is throughout the action of the story no frame of reference such as one finds in Hawthorne or Balzac, for instance.

This lack of a frame of reference larger than that of the individual action is characteristic of most contemporary fiction. Nowadays a story by any fiction writer who came on the scene later than, say, Scott Fitzgerald is likely to read like a case history. Moll Flanders used occasionally to refer—if hypocritically—to the life she ought to have led. Such reflections rarely occur to the characters in modern fiction. "This," they seem to be saying breathlessly, "is the way it was or is with me." Never the way it should have been or might be.

Miss O'Connor's talent, occurring in such a milieu, is as startling, as disconcerting as a blast from a furnace which one had thought stone-cold but which is still red-hot.

Haze Motes, Miss O'Connor's hero, is illiterate and of lowly

origins, but he is spiritually kin to more highly placed Americans. His whole life is given over to a speculation on the nature of Christ, the union of the divine with the human which theologians term "the hypostatic union." The philosopher and amateur theologian, Henry James the elder, whom the critic, Austin Warren, numbers among his "New England saints," spent his life in a similar preoccupation. Haze, being illiterate, states his disbelief in words of one syllable: "My Church is the Church Without Christ." The elder James, better educated, speaks of "the venomous tradition of a disproportion between Man and his Maker." Haze has a broken-down flivver as his pulpit. The elder Henry James also had a high regard for locomotion as a means of arriving at the truth. "The horse car," he once remarked, "is the true Shechinah of our day." Like Haze, he was bent on founding a church, his "New Church," of which, as somebody wittily remarked, he was the only member. But he was a philosopher rather than a man of action and spent the greater part of his life at his desk, writing the same book over and over, as his son, William James, observed in the preface he wrote for his father's works. Haze, a man of action and, it seems to me, a tragic hero, dies in a ditch, self-blinded as the penalty of his disbelief.

Malcolm Cowley and other critics have remarked the prevalence of the Christ figure in contemporary fiction and in the fiction of the past twenty years. Faulkner's corporal in *A Fable*, Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Dick Diver in *Tender Is the Night*, Gatsby—all seem bent on laying down their lives in the hope of finding a fuller life. Even Thomas Wolfe's hero in *You Can't Go Home Again* hopes to "leave this world for fuller living."

But the works of all these writers, with the exception of Fitzgerald, whose Catholic bias and apprehension of theological truths was perhaps deeper than he himself realized, reveal a lack of acquaintance with fundamental Christian doctrine. Ours is the first age in which a man could call himself educated and know no theology. This indifference to and ignorance of the "Science of Sciences" is by no means confined to American writers. Albert Camus' brilliant, uneven novel, *The Fall*, is a case in point. The subject matter of the novel is the depravity, which, according to Christian doctrine, is inherent in all of us since the Fall of Man, and the action is an exercise in theological dialectic on the part of

the hero and the partner he has chosen for this exercise. But the author's lack of acquaintance with his subject matter renders his technique infirm. At the moment when the reader should be intent on the *dénouement*—on *what is happening*—his attention is likely to stray. He may even find himself indulging in speculation, his credulity perhaps over-taxed by the hero's modernistic and highly individual interpretation of the Crucifixion. M. Camus' hero holds that Christ forced the Jews and Romans to crucify him in order to rid himself of the "guilt complex" he had incurred as the result of Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents.

The fiction writer, as Chekhov once pointed out to an oversensitive lady reader, has the right, indeed the duty, to deal with any manifestations of human life which come within the province of his art. He has another responsibility fully as grave. No matter what kind of people he portrays, no matter what they are doing, he must make his portrayal so life-like that (while we are reading his book) we must be convinced that this is what really happened. A novelist who has a plumber, or a pimp, or a nuclear physicist, say, for his hero would presumably go to some pains to acquaint himself with the kinds of lives led by the majority of plumbers or pimps or nuclear physicists. But M. Camus seems curiously ignorant of the "vital statistics" of the times of which he is writing. Ancient hagiographers put the number of "Holy Innocents" slain at 144,000, as an "accommodation" to a passage in the Apocalypse. The Syrian menologies estimated it at 64,000, but modern hagiographers, from Alban Butler down, point out that a town the size of Bethlehem could not have produced more than twenty-five boy babies eligible for Herod's slaughter. The guilt complex which M. Camus ascribes to the Savior of the World is so disproportionate to its cause that the structure of the novel is disjointed. The action does not resolve itself satisfactorily. As a result, the edifice which the author has been at such pains to erect, is flawed at its base, and totters.

But Miss O'Connor is, after all, an American. It is perhaps more profitable to compare her work with that of another distinguished American writer who is, like her, a Southerner.

The corporal in William Faulkner's *A Fable* has twelve disciples who inevitably remind the reader of the Twelve Disciples and he lays down his life for others, but the analogy to the Christ figure stops there. The reader who has come to expect from this author a

higher degree of verisimilitude than most fiction writers achieve is considerably taken aback when a Roman Catholic priest begins voicing beliefs which his training and his profession would seem to preclude his uttering, in short, begins talking like a Haze Motes:

"It wasn't He with his humility and pity and sacrifice that converted the world; it was pagan and bloody Rome which did it with His martyrdom; furious and intractable dreamers had been bringing that same dream out of Asia Minor for three hundred years until at last one found a caesar foolish enough to crucify Him. . . . Because only Rome could have done it, accomplished it, and even He knew . . . knew it, felt and sensed this, furious and intractable dreamer though He was. Because He even said it Himself: *On this rock I found My church*, even while He didn't—and never would—realise the true significance of what He was saying. . . ."

Mr. Faulkner's theology—what there is of it—would appear to have come down to him from his grandfather's time, derived, perhaps, from a reading of Renan. His priest's statement, slightly clouded by rhetoric, is the kind of heresy to which Renan subscribed. Miss O'Connor's "prophet" is fully as heretical but his logical processes are more exact. And he speaks—terrifyingly—for our own time. Is that because he is, in his way, an Existentialist?

I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is that there's no truth. . . . No truth behind all truths is what I and this church preach! Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place.

In Miss O'Connor's vision of modern man—a vision not limited to Southern rural humanity—all her characters are "displaced persons," not merely the people in the story of that name. They are "off center," out of place, because they are victims of a rejection of the Scheme of Redemption. They are lost in that abyss which opens for man when he sets up as God. This theological framework is never explicit in Miss O'Connor's fiction. It is so much a part of her direct gaze at human conduct that she seems herself to be scarcely aware of it. I believe that this accounts to a great extent for her power. It is a Blakean vision, not through

symbol as such but through the actuality of human behavior; and it has Blake's explosive honesty, such as we find in

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born infant's tear
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

FLANNERY O'CONNOR: A NOTE ON LITERARY FASHIONS

LOUIS D. RUBIN, JR.

Trumpet voluntary, procession commences, enter Mr. John W. Aldridge, smiting cult and coterie, to wit:

Miss Flannery O'Connor . . . is . . . a distinctly minor novelist; yet she alone of all the fellows has enjoyed the honor of receiving two *Kenyon* awards in fiction. The reason presumably is that Miss O'Connor has lately become the official "younger Southern novelist" of the quarterlies. Her fiction has to do, in the main, with simple Southern peasant folk against rustic Southern back-grounds, and for the academic Northern intellectual what is Southern and rustic is synonymous with all that is original, serious, and true in American letters. In a sense, Miss O'Connor does for the academic intellectuals what Truman Capote does for the pseudo-intellectuals of the flossy New York fashion-magazine world—she provides them with tone or chic, a little sprinkling of fake old magnolia blossoms; she is the literary equivalent of the Grand Rapids-Modern spider furniture which they display in their living rooms along with the work of the most recently modish, obscure nineteenth-century Provençal painter. Miss O'Connor has therefore won a high place in the hall of quarterly fame.

So Mr. Aldridge, in search of heresy, and finding little. But he made only half his case, for her Southernness is but one of the ways whereby Flannery O'Connor might be said to be fashionable in the literary *haut monde* just now. She is also a Roman Catholic. She writes from a strong theological bias. Among those whose blurbs appear on the dust jacket of her second book are Caroline Gordon and Evelyn Waugh, the latter with a rather ambivalent quotation to be sure. If to be a Southern writer is to be intellectually in fashion these days, to be a Catholic writer is likewise. This is, as we all know, "a time of significant conversions," and the Seven-Storey Mountain still towers loftily.

Literary fashions are the most ephemeral things, of interest to cultural historians, to sociologists even, to everyone except, from the next generation onward, readers of literature as literature. Yet we are all so closely involved in literary fashions, and of course we can only dimly recognize that they are fashions, because the mode seems so natural, so crucial to us at the time. Mr. Aldridge sees the university, and the quarterly review published at the university, as a fashion, one that is debilitating and stifling, causing the really original novelists to get overlooked because they are not fashionable. Do you betake yourself from academe and face up to your talent "under the cold, pitiless gaze of posterity," he enjoins our younger novelists. A worthy taskmaster indeed, that cold, pitiless gaze of posterity, and of course we applaud Mr. Aldridge's advocacy of it, though we doubt perhaps that Mr. Aldridge has any better idea than we do about where it is or how to find it.

There is, too, the little matter of Miss O'Connor's not being actually affiliated with any one of those universities, being a resident of a town in Georgia, so that if she is being perverted into fashionableness by the insidious university world, it must be because of those big fat checks she receives once or twice a year from the lavishly-paying quarterly reviews that publish her short stories. One doubts that Miss O'Connor can be bought off so cheaply as that. But no matter. Consistency is not one of Mr. Aldridge's virtues*, and the general indictment still stands, and should be noted.

* As the present writer knows so well. For Mr. Aldridge lumps me and a score of other writers together, in his ingenious *In Search of Heresy*, as constituting a coterie of unknown writers who received fellowships from the *Sewanee Review* mainly because they were contributors to that magazine. The fact is that not for over a year after I received that fellowship did I publish anything in the *Sewanee Review*. And later on in the same book Mr. Aldridge discusses a book of mine, misspelling the title in the bargain. I do not therefore see how I could have been *entirely* unknown to Mr. Aldridge. Far from agreeing with Mr. Aldridge's indictment of the *Sewanee* fellowships as having been rewards to a safely mediocre coterie, it has always seemed to me that, in my own instance at least, the editors of that magazine took a considerable chance in giving me a fellowship, since at that time (1953) I had published nothing anywhere save in my own magazine! And I am forced to admit that in the years since then their

Well, then, Miss O'Connor is fashionable. She writes about hill folk, country-come-to-town, itinerent salesmen, Bible vendors, tenant farmers, just as William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell do, and supposedly she rides the wave of their popularity. She writes about Catholic priests, and matins, and convents, and original sin, and those *too* are popular. It is almost a quarterly review version of the old Lincoln's Doctor's Dog recipe. So Mr. Aldridge protests mightily, presumably not sharing either bias, and talks of Mr. William Styron as an example of a much better writer than Miss O'Connor who does not enjoy the favor of the quarterly reviews and who is therefore neglected and ostracized and *not* given two Kenyon fellowships.

Now when Mr. Aldridge laments Mr. Styron's failure to receive a Kenyon or Sewanee fellowship, I am all with him. Mr. Styron did receive the Prix de Rome one year, as I recall, but that award isn't in the quarterly review league, and it is quite true that Mr. Styron's work has thus far not met with especial approbation from the major quarterly reviews. To that extent, it seems to me, the quarterly reviews are quite blind. (Of course I don't know whether Mr. Styron ever applied for one of the quarterly review fellowships in the first place, and I assume Miss O'Connor did. Perhaps Mr. Styron did not feel he needed the fellowship stipend, and Miss O'Connor felt she did.) But all this is not the point. The plain truth is that Mr. Styron's worth as a novelist has nothing to do with Miss O'Connor's Kenyon fellowship, and vice versa. And when Mr. Aldridge comes along and informs us that for the quarterly reviews to give a fellowship to Miss O'Connor is proof of how decadent and depraved and inbred the quarterly reviews are, the only response can be to tell Mr. Aldridge to go bark up another tree. In order to be able to appreciate Mr. Styron's work, it is emphatically not necessary to feel that Miss O'Connor is "a distinctly minor novelist." I happen to admire both writers, and for many of the same reasons.

A better example than William Styron for Mr. Aldridge's purpose might be James Gould Cozzens, for as far as literary characteristics go, Miss O'Connor and Mr. Styron are far more

quite blind faith in me has been largely unvindicated. So in my own case at least, Mr. Aldridge's strictures could not be more absurd. Perhaps some of the other *Sewanee* fellows fit his specifications better.

akin than either is to Mr. Cozzens. But if one judges writers by those who admire their work, Mr. Aldridge is forced to place Mr. Styron with Mr. Cozzens. Both are largely unhallowed by the better quarterly reviews, both are "best sellers," and in the literary cocktail circuit, both play in the Connecticut-New York League and not the *Kenyon-Sewanee* League. And that is purely nonsense, because Mr. Styron is worth three of James Gould Cozzens, just as Miss O'Connor is—again, for roughly the same reasons.

Yet, when we deal with writers in terms of their fashionableness, that is what we run into.

As for myself, I don't propose to evaluate Flannery O'Connor's merits in terms of who likes and who dislikes her, but in terms of the achievement, or lack of it, of her books. On those terms, it seems to me that she is an important writer, important for our own time, which is the only time we know. She is important because her fiction affords us a perception of an aspect of the human situation that seems to me to be most crucial just now, and into the nature of which she has provided some terrifying artistic insights.

Miss O'Connor thus far has published a novel, *Wise Blood*, and a number of stories, most of which are included in the collection *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*. Her novel, which appeared first, is only a moderately successful work, marred, I think, by its too obvious religious allegory, causing the protagonist, Hazel Motes, to lose believability because his theological role is improperly and inadequately motivated. Despite some extremely fine scenes and supporting characterizations, Hazel is driven toward destruction for reasons insufficiently credible to the reader. We never manage enough sympathy for Hazel to make his struggle and his fall mean something.

It is in the stories contained in *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* that Miss O'Connor attains her full stature as a writer. Almost all of them are successful, some come close to being brilliant. There is nothing gauzy or scented about the style; *pace* Mr. Aldridge, Miss O'Connor has never been known to deal in magnolia blossoms. The language is precise, bounded, direct, oddly masculine:

Red Sam came in and told his wife to quit lounging on the counter and hurry up with these people's order. His khaki

trousers reached just to his hip bones and his stomach hung over them like a sack of meal swaying under his shirt. He came over and sat down at a table nearby and let out a combination sigh and yodel. "You can't win," he said. "You can't win," and he wiped his sweating red face off with a gray handkerchief. "These days you don't know who to trust," he said. "Ain't that the truth?"

There is a great deal of dialogue, with Miss O'Connor's ear for country talk employed to fine ironic advantage. The sense of the ludicrous is reminiscent of Erskine Caldwell, but without Caldwell's constant emphasis on the grotesque. Where Caldwell's theme is directed toward social consciousness, hers is moral and spiritual. Sometimes she comes down too hard on this score; the story entitled "Good Country People" is weakened by the theological moral, gained at the expense of congruity and verisimilitude. In another, "A Stroke of Good Fortune," the flaw is not so much theological as moral; Miss O'Connor wishes to depict evasion of responsibility, and her disapproval results in a fetid, Dreiserian naturalism of surface.

More often, Miss O'Connor blends language and attitude in a flawless artistic unity. The title story, one of the finest in a fine collection of tales, utilizes humor, extremely appropriate dialogue, and a devastating irony to produce a powerful account of human beings suddenly come face to face with disaster. It is the kind of story that improves with each rereading, and the interplay of seeming unreality and desperate finality haunts the imagination afterward. Another excellent story is "The Artificial Nigger," in which, while seemingly working entirely on the literal level, Miss O'Connor shows the profound terror of men confronted with the unknown. Then there is "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," in which, again drawing upon her talent for dialogue, Miss O'Connor achieves a story both absurdly comic and devastatingly pathetic in its moral implications.

But the most distinguished story in *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* is a long narrative entitled "The Displaced Person," presented in three sections, and really more of a novelette than a short story. "The Displaced Person" is Miss O'Connor's fullest achievement thus far; indeed, I could wish that in a volume all by itself, so that its sustained originality and thoroughgoing working out of a situation might be emphasized.

The setting of "The Displaced Person" is a medium-sized

Southern farm, operated by a woman who inherited it from her first husband. At the instigation of a Catholic priest, she brings in a family of displaced persons from eastern Europe to work on it. The efficiency of Mr. Guizac, the displaced person, his tireless energy, his complete ignorance of Southern rural mores—he exposes one of the Negro hands who has been stealing poultry, later proposes that the same Negro bring over his own cousin and marry her—all combine to disrupt utterly the pattern of life of the hitherto inefficient, lackadaisical farm community. First the Shortleys, the family of white farm workers, are displaced. Soon the satisfaction of the proprietor, Mrs. McIntyre, over the farm's vastly increased efficiency, begins to give way to a growing sense of insecurity. She misses the gossip of Mrs. Shortley, the feeling of familiarity and of superiority to which she had been accustomed with people of her own kind in her employ. The strangeness of Mr. Guizac's ways, the determined energy and intelligence with which he goes about his work, disturb her more and more. Her tenant farmers, white and Negro, were her inferiors because of their shiftless ways and lack of intelligence; but Mr. Guizac is obviously neither shiftless nor stupid. His less prosperous status, therefore, cannot be attributed to anything involving justice and order. Something unknown, something terrible and evil, in no way explainable in terms of just deserts and a rational, benevolent universe, must have been responsible for his situation. The comfortable compromises of her own social and moral horizon are thus seriously disturbed.

She does not verbalize or consciously reason out this situation; she only senses it, vaguely, uneasily, fearfully, and she attributes her discomfort to more immediate and tangible reasons. Finally she decides to give Mr. Guizac his notice. But the Southern white worker, Mr. Shortley, has returned with word that his wife died of a stroke on the day that they fled the farm to avoid being discharged. "I figure that Pole killed her," he remarks. "She seen through him from the first. She known he came from the devil. She told me so." Before Mrs. McIntyre can notify Mr. Guizac that he is to leave, he is crushed to death, apparently by accident, by a tractor which Mr. Shortley had been driving.

Knowing that she is somehow responsible for all this, and dimly conscious, too, of her helplessness in the face of larger forces than she had ever dreamed existed, Mrs. McIntyre col-

lapses, and soon goes to pieces, developing a nervous affliction and giving up her farm. Finally she loses both her speech and sight, and can only lie in bed while the old Catholic priest who had first suggested Mr. Guizac to her comes once a week, the only person who still remembers her, to sit by her side and explain the doctrines of the Church. She is now the Displaced Person; the things she had been taught to believe, the world she thought she knew, have failed her.

What now of Miss O'Connor's "fashionableness"? The story "The Displaced Person" is about Southerners, and Catholicism figures importantly in its setting. But the central perception of the story is restricted neither to the South nor to Catholicism, for these particular modes are no more or less than a frame of reference. Miss O'Connor has used them, drawn expertly and imaginatively upon the possibilities inherent in them, to create a story not merely about Georgia farm folk and displaced Poles, but about human isolation everywhere. That is her theme. The farm folk of "The Displaced Person" are insulated from the sick desperation of the world, and in their insularity have lived easily and without woe. But the world comes in. They are in Eden, but the evil of our time impinges. When it comes, they are helpless, unprepared, and would deny it and reaffirm their innocence. They cannot do so, and they are destroyed.

That is Miss O'Connor's dominant artistic perception, and her art is built upon it. Southern po' whites going about their days in their own unlettered and ignorant searchings, isolated from God; Southern townsfolk confronting suddenly the face of evil; Catholics readjusting the requirements of their religion to conform to the innocence and hedonism of their surroundings; men, that is, on earth, coming to terms or failing to come to terms with the evil and tragedy of life. The setting is rural Southern, the statement of the theme is Catholic, but the problem itself is valid for a far wider time and place.

I do not mean to imply that "The Displaced Person," or any of Miss O'Connor's other stories, could exist just as well if the author knew nothing of Catholicism, or if she were a resident of, say, Connecticut, instead of Georgia. Without Miss O'Connor's intense appreciation of rural life in the South, of the attitude of Southern whites to Catholics and to foreigners, of the peculiar tensions of being both Catholic and Southern, of the way that Southerners talk and act, the particular charac-

teristics of Catholic priests and Catholic laymen, and so on—without these, "The Displaced Person" as it is constituted would not exist at all. The theme of this story comes out of, is built squarely upon the particulars of the time and the place. The point is that Miss O'Connor uses this material for artistic purposes; her story's success does not depend upon the reader's interest in the particular milieu. These are images, concretions; it is the universal insight embodied in them and given form by them that gives the story its impact. There is nothing peculiarly Southern or peculiarly Catholic about the nature of isolation. This human limitation knows no geographical or theological boundary. What Miss O'Connor has done is to recognize it and objectify it in what she herself knows; as an artist, that is her task.

Let us not, then, judge Flannery O'Connor in terms of literary fashions and literary coteries. In determining her success as an artist, what is important is not who likes her and who doesn't, what fashionable or unfashionable materials she uses in her writing, but what she does, as a writer of fiction, *with* those materials and interests. If, indeed, such vices as coterie and academicism are so rampant today, one will not prove superior to them by affecting to sneer at a genuine artist like Flannery O'Connor. There is far too much inferior work abroad, whether on campus or in metropolitan drawing room, to permit us to withhold encouragement from a dedicated and devoted craftsman, under whatever auspices and in whatever circumstances she may be found.

HOLLINS COLLEGE

VIEW FROM A ROCK: THE FICTION OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR & J. F. POWERS

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Unambiguously, the term *Catholic* before *physician*, *teacher*, *butcher*, *engineer*, refers to the fact that each of these persons belongs to the Catholic Church. Yet if the adjective *Catholic* is prefixed to *writer* ambiguity immediately results. Does the speaker mean someone who whether a Catholic or not presents a view of reality similar to or identical with that held by those within the Church, or a writer who happens to be a Catholic and who may or may not let this commitment be evident in what he writes? Although practitioners of the other arts do not seem to be victims of this confusion to the extent that writers are, here too the world tends to measure their achievement against an ideal which other painters, sculptors, musicians do not have to meet. The present essay aims at clarification of just how short-story writers Flannery O'Connor and J. F. Powers can be designated by the title *Catholic writers*, with a secondary objective of winning for their vignettes of "life in these United States" the openmindedness and concentration on the part of readers which their art deserves.

Miss O'Connor has not been unmindful of the question "What is a Catholic writer?" Neither has she brushed off the label as one which she does not care to have associated with her. She has tried to present for public scrutiny the fruit of her meditations on the subject in at least two articles—"The Church and the Fiction Writer" and "The Fiction Writer and His Country," the former published in a 1957 issue of *America* and the latter her contribution to Granville Hicks's symposium, *The Living Novel*. In these she proposes that the Catholic writer is one who is humble before reality, never manipulating it and never turning his eyes away from its ugly or unpleasant phases. True humility is based upon the recognition that whatever of

good man has comes to him from God; in the case of the writer it is his talent; which must be admitted to be God-given, with all its limitations as well as its powers. Before scenes that one writer can re-create in words another is helplessly inarticulate, since within the large vocation of writer there are more specialized vocations; indeed, as Miss O'Connor says in "The Fiction Writer and His Country," "a vocation is a limiting factor which extends even to the kind of material that the writer is able to apprehend imaginatively. . . . The Christian writer particularly will feel that whatever his initial gift is, it comes from God; and no matter how minor a gift it is, he will not be willing to destroy it by trying to use it outside its proper limits." Thus, though she hates the phrase *regional writer*, her settings are Southern, and though she does not disbelieve in joy her characters are drawn from those who have crippled it within them.

The Catholic writer reveals reality: all writers, to the extent they do this, are Catholic writers. It is not the artist's job to assure modern America that because she is the greatest nation on the face of the globe, all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well. The Pharisees did not like a good many of the things the Lord told them, especially in the parables, yet these stories are great literature; to go back further, the Jews did not like what the Prophets told them—they were not reassured by Osee or Jonah or Ezekiel. (These allusions, of course, are not meant to attribute exhortation to Miss O'Connor.) If the grotesque is an important part of reality today the Catholic writer must not only portray grotesquerie but make sure that readers are shocked into realizing it as such, in an age when the perverse is accepted as the normal. Actually, "a purely affirmative vision cannot be demanded of him [the Catholic writer] without limiting his freedom to observe what man has done with the things of God." ("The Church and the Fiction Writer.")

Undoubtedly Flannery O'Connor, at the University of Iowa writers' workshop, in which she participated for two years, and elsewhere, has often met this query: "But doesn't your religion inhibit you? Doesn't it restrict the freedom of your art?" Her reply is a straightforward, "Not at all; in fact, quite the contrary." Her reasons for making this denial show that she has penetrated the sense of the Biblical line "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." In the essay quoted from above, she explains her position:

I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to a writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it frees the storyteller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery.

In other words, it gives him a vantage point in the universe, a "view from a rock," where, knowing exactly where he is, he can accept the materials brought him by his servant the eye and, transfiguring them in the light of his mind, fashion microcosm after microcosm as he pursues his craft. Moreover, it prevents his mistaking statistics for reality by insisting that he use the absolute and not the relative as criterion. Rather than hindering artistry, Catholicism makes it imperative; in this article Miss O'Connor goes on to say, "When people have told me that because I am a Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic I cannot afford to be less than an artist."

But most crucial of all (the adjective is a pertinent one) in understanding what constitutes a Catholic writer is the realization that for such a person history leads up to and away from what happened on Calvary the first Good Friday. The center of all Catholic fiction is the Redemption. However mean or miserable or degraded human life may seem to the natural gaze, it must never be forgotten that God considered it valuable enough to send His only Son that He might reclaim it; the old priest in the last story of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* tries in vain to bring this divine mission home to the spiritually wizened Mrs. McIntyre, who in behalf of her world proclaims: "As far as I'm concerned . . . Christ was just another D. P." Jesus, indeed, is compared to the criminal, the Misfit, in the title story of the same volume. Contemporary society in recent years has made a business of denying its need of redemption, the advertising agencies being among its chief allies in this endeavor. In "The Artificial Nigger" Flannery O'Connor shows up such blindness in these words: "Mr. Head had never known before what mercy felt like because he had been too good to deserve any, but he felt he knew now." The old man has undergone a transformation that his grandson, for whom the trip to Atlanta has been arranged, does not share, but which enables Mr. Head to see "that no sin was too monstrous for him to

claim as his own," and even, in view of God's incomprehensible love, to consider himself ready to enter Paradise. The Catholic writer, his apprehension of life informed by the cross and its cause, will expose the leprous sores and blinded eyes and withered hands of those to be found on the highways and byways, not omitting to record, as in "The Enduring Chill," a recent story by Miss O'Connor appearing in *Harper's Bazaar*, the moments when the saving Dove comes to rest upon the head of the sinner, while in the same spirit of integrity refusing to falsify the instances where this miracle does not occur.

Not all writers who are Catholics, as he who runs may read, are Catholic writers in the sense outlined above. Some, like Catholic readers, have oversimplified literature into sentimentality and obscenity and choose to cast in their lot with the former, taking—to use Miss O'Connor's descriptive phrase—a short cut to mock innocence rather than allowing the redemptive grace of Christ to work itself out gradually, as she herself so skillfully does in "The Enduring Chill," where Asbury Fox finally falls prey to the Holy Ghost after he discovers that what he took as a mortal sickness was merely undulant fever and that years of purification remain stretched out before him.

J. F. Powers, whose career as a storyteller began some years earlier than Miss O'Connor's, would probably subscribe to these views of hers on the problem of the Catholic writer, though with somewhat less of spiritual poise, confidence, and reliance upon the assets that his faith offers him. In his criticism he reveals himself as preoccupied by tensions which Miss O'Connor does not admit as operative. For example, in reviewing the published correspondence between Maritain and Cocteau he remarks:

There is a necessary contradiction existing between the artist and the saint, a question of ends even more than means, and those two never shall meet; though when there is a little of both, in a man, or a lot of one, you might sometimes think so. (*Commonweal*, XLVIII, 105)

Pushed to an extreme, such a position is Joycean. To the artist guided by humility, however, need there be a dichotomy between art and sanctity? Art is the way certain persons work out their salvation—indeed, over and above that, achieve their sanctifica-

tion. If Dante is ever canonized this point may be less difficult to establish.

Despite this contradiction which Powers sees between the claims of literature and those of religion, it would hardly seem that he merits the comment made by Robert Bowen, who in reviewing *The Presence of Grace* says: "J. F. Powers is probably best thought of not as a Catholic writer but as a writer who happens to be Catholic." No person who is faithful to his native endowments "happens" to be what he is; his role in the Mystical Body (and the "presence of grace" entitles Powers to inclusion in this) is providentially arranged. In the roles of physician, teacher, butcher, and engineer, fidelity means being the best possible of these; in the role of writer, it means effecting "a delicate adjustment of the outer and inner worlds in such a way that, without changing their nature, they can be seen through each other." ("The Fiction Writer and His Country") In some of his stories, Powers definitely achieves this adjustment, notably in that wonderful drama of race relations "The Trouble"; in others, for example some of his rectory tales, he is not quite so successful. But in failure or success his Catholicism is more to him than just an accident of birth; it illuminates his whole approach, showing up objects and people in a light which grows upon his audience with each rereading of the stories. Evelyn Waugh, one of his earliest admirers, has always, perhaps to an exaggerated degree, perceived this orientation of his fiction: in a review of *Prince of Darkness* he says: "Mr. Powers is almost unique in his country as a lay writer who is at ease in the Church; whose whole art, moreover, is everywhere infused and directed by his Faith." This admiration may not be without its narcissistic elements: Powers has been referred to in *Time* as "Waughspish." Both, however, are more than just writers who happen to be Catholics, cradle or otherwise.

Unlike Miss O'Connor, whose plots may involve wholesale murder, arson, seduction, or death by a maddened bull, Powers writes of everyday incidents which when cumulated achieve as great a horror as the more violent subjects of the Southern storyteller, because they represent treason to an ideal. Most often his method of construction is a dialectical one, two characters pitting their forces one against the other not in any sensational issues but rather in such petty fencing matches as Monsignor Sweeney's attempt to "civilize" his assistant in "The

Forks," or a superior's futile efforts to induce the pastor to buy a new stove for the convent in "The Lord's Day," or Father Fabre's maneuvering to get a desk for his room in "A Losing Game." One can usually detect the spirit of a reformer in these dramas featuring the minutiae of a rectory—a zeal to some extent wasted upon the readers of *The New Yorker*, or even *Partisan Review*, where Powers has frequently published.

One critic, Haldan Whey, has said about Powers: "Catholicism is his scene, not his platform; as an artist he uses it in much the same way Conrad used the sea or Kipling India, to provide him with the images, tones and accents of his speech." If the details in *Prince of Darkness* and *The Presence of Grace* are such as might logically be expected from a Catholic writer, using the term narrowly—in the latter, only "Blue Island" (about the Daviccis' frustrations in breaking into suburban society) has no explicit religious references—the details in stories by Miss O'Connor are less obviously the by-products of her Faith. Living as she does in the Bible Belt, she deals typically with Protestants. Yet even so all of the stories contain some imagery or thought-passages which show the influence of her Catholicism. In "The Artificial Nigger" Mr. Head's journey through the streets of Atlanta for the purpose of educating his grandson is similar to Dante's trip through the Inferno, except that ironically it is the guide who is enlightened: "He felt he knew now what time would be like without seasons and what heat would be like without light and what man would be like without salvation." The train which brought Nelson and his grandfather to their home disappears, at the end of the story, like the frightened serpent of Eden. "The Circle of Fire" shows three boys who, having set fire to Mrs. Cope's woods, dance and shout in a clearing, sounding to the distraught houseowner like the three servants of God in the fiery furnace. In "Greenleaf," the tenant farmer's face is shaped like a rough chalice. Faced with sleeping in a car, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Mr. Shiftlet says with delight: "Why, listen, Lady, the monks of old slept in their coffins!" These are only a few of the places where scriptural or sacramental references occur.

But more important than incidental touches is Miss O'Connor's whole world—country is the word she prefers—as mirrored in her fiction. The sacraments, by explication, or implication, are represented there: Baptism in "The River," Confirmation in "A

Temple of the Holy Ghost," Matrimony in "A Stroke of Good Fortune," Extreme Unction in "The Displaced Person," Penance in "The Enduring Chill." The nature of man revolves around his possession of moral intelligence, as even unethical Mr. Shiftlet points out. Prayer is a real force, and hell a certainty, its entrance symbolized by the opening to sewer passages on the streets of Atlanta.

A few of the O'Connor stories include Catholics. Notable among these is "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," concerning Susan and Joanne, on a week-end vacation from Mount Saint Scholastica, a high school for girls. The unattractive child who is the point-of-view character thinks joyfully of the title phrase, which these older cousins ridicule as tiresome sermonizing inflicted upon them by one of the nuns at the academy. In her stream of consciousness, objects frequently have religious associations: the pictures of circus performers on tents have "stiff stretched composed faces like the faces of martyrs waiting to have their tongues cut out by the Roman soldier," and the sun is "a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood." The tale, like Hemingway's "The Killers" and Anderson's "I Want to Know Why," has an initiation theme, though here the existence of evil as concretized in an obscene side show is only dimly recognized by the heroine. What remains in the reader's mind is the child's striving after the life of grace, her realistic reporting of what actually goes on in the isolation of the young mind.

Two of this author's stories number priests among their characters: "The Displaced Person" and "The Enduring Chill." The pastor in the former story is described thus: "He was a long-legged black-suited old man with a white hat on and a collar that he wore backwards, which, Mrs. Shortley knew, was what priests did who wanted to be known as priests." At every visit to Mrs. McIntyre's farm Father Flynn is entranced by her peacock, to him a symbol of Christ—His Transfiguration and Resurrection. There are a pair of priests in "The Enduring Chill," the intellectual Father Vogle, S.J. (whose name suggests the symbolic dove used to integrate the action) and the bombastic Father Finn, also a Jesuit, who scolds Asbury Fox, non-Catholic, for not saying his prayers and knowing his catechism after Asbury has summoned him, on a whim, to his sick bed. These priests have less of compromise with their vocation than any of Powers' clergymen, with the exception of Father Eudex in "The Forks"

and the priest who comes on the sick call in "The Trouble." A superficial interpretation of Father Finn, with his one bad eye and his deafness, might give the impression that Miss O'Connor is ridiculing the priesthood, an impression often conveyed by Powers even after the rereading of his work but one which, it is true, tends to lessen as the portrayals are pondered. However, the Jesuit's almost brutal assault on Asbury's arrogance prepares the way for grace and makes it possible for the story to end:

The old life in him was exhausted. He awaited the coming of new. It was then that he felt the beginning of a chill, a chill so peculiar, so light, that it was like a warm ripple across a deeper sea of cold. His breath came short. The fierce bird [a stain on the ceiling] which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend.

In judging how well J. F. Powers characterizes his priests, how truly he sees their struggles to fulfill their sacerdotal duties, the reader must not lose sight of this author's humorous intention, else a completely distorted evaluation will result, like that of the Irish audiences who booed *The Playboy of the Western World*. The satirist heightens reality; moreover, he is concerned with surfaces, not depths. Mediocrity has moments, hours, of soul-searching; and these minor or major agonies do not appear in the portraits of Fathers Burner, Philbrick, Desmond, Udovic, except in that flash where the last-mentioned projects himself into future damnation. The only place where Powers really explores to an adequate degree the conscience of a priest is his analysis of Father Didymus in "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does"—incidentally, the only time when he chooses as fictional material the Franciscans, who staffed his own college at Quincy, Illinois. It is true that there is scope for the humorous talent in the incongruities accompanying a picture of salt that has lost its savor. It is also true that human is apt to have something cruel about it: thus, the absence of love in the lives of so many of the priests in stories by Powers does not call forth the compassion

it might well elicit, while at the same time it does not call down the denunciation given by Christ to the lukewarm, an exhortation to which none but God Himself has a right.

Flannery O'Connor, on the other hand, pities the poor and afflicted denizens of the rural South who people her novel *Wise Blood* and her short stories. They are largely warped in spirit, a warping which becomes increasingly evident as their tales unfold; but somehow the shriveling of their souls has taken them by surprise and one cannot help feeling sympathy for the abortive efforts of each to break through the cocoon of ice that surrounds him or her—despite all barriers, to reach some sort of fulfillment. The evangelical religion of her area holds out to them little promise for communion either with the Deity or with each other. To Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person" religion is essential only for people who, unlike herself, do not have brains enough to avoid evil without it, affording for those of her caliber nothing more than a social occasion, with the devil the head of it and God a hanger-on. Mrs. May in "Greenleaf" is "a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true." She has nothing but contempt for prayer-healer Mrs. Greenleaf, who apparently does believe that it is true but degrades herself to animalistic levels in practicing it.

The most cynical of all the tales in Miss O'Connor's single collection to date is "Good Country People," where a Bible salesman robs Joy, an atheist teacher, of her wooden leg, for which she tenderly cares "as someone else would his soul." But even here the Gothic terror, combined with wit, does not leave the story stripped of grief that such things should be so. It is as if the author joins in the prayer which one of her characters makes after he has executed a particularly distasteful deception: "'Oh Lord!' he prayed. 'Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!'" Yet for both Flannery O'Connor and J. F. Powers, writing from the vantage point of the Rock, the exercise of their craft is a literary, not a therapeutic, matter. Without trying to remedy it (much as they wish it otherwise) they record what they see, though there is a difference, in Miss O'Connor's favor, in the depths to which they see.

COLLEGE OF SAINT TERESA

THE COMPLEX MORAL VISION OF J. F. POWERS

JOHN P. SISK

Lionel Trilling, writing in the January, 1958, *Griffin* about James Agee's *A Death in the Family*, takes issue with Dwight Macdonald's statement in the November 16, 1957, *New Yorker* that "Agee believed in and—what is rarer—was interested in good and evil." Mr. Trilling believes that "evil was relatively an abstraction" for Agee, and that the "inability to confront ambivalence constitutes a deficiency in Agee's moral vision" despite the fact that Agee has a rare ability to imagine virtue. It is intolerable for him "that anyone in his novel should give evidence of the fallen human condition."

This argument may not impress Mr. Macdonald, who might counter that Trilling is straining in his essay to make an effective connection with the legendary quality of Isak Dinesen's *Last Tales*. Nevertheless, the point Trilling wishes to make about Agee is a significant one for a study of the short stories of J. F. Powers. Powers not only has what both Trilling and Macdonald agree is a rare virtue in a modern writer—the ability to imagine virtue—but he also has the ability to portray virtue in its complex relations with evil, an ability that includes, though it may go considerably beyond, the ability to confront ambivalence. Indeed, the complexity of Powers' moral vision is almost paradoxical, since it is revealed in a neat, witty and restrained style that by itself would seem to promise the more abstract and simple moral vision of a writer like Evelyn Waugh.

The story "Zeal" is typical of this complexity. Here a bishop, on the first leg of his journey to Rome, is unhappily involved with a Father Early, who is leading a band of pilgrims to Rome. The bishop, who "had a priest or two in his diocese like Father Early," recognizes him as an irritating, officious zealot and wants no part of him. He has been looking forward to a journey of pleasant solitude; the prospect of being saddled with this bore, if only between Minneapolis and New York, dismays him.

Between trains at Chicago he is maneuvered into playing cicerone to an elderly pair of pilgrims. Later he is forced to go to the dining car with Father Early and there suffers the embarrassment of the priest's conversation with a young couple at a neighboring table. When the couple leaves, Father Early tells the bishop that he thinks the two of them have been drinking, that they have only met on the train, and that the young man is a Catholic. "I believe the boy's in danger. Real danger." This, in the bishop's opinion, is none of their business. The bishop retires to his compartment, but later, when he realizes that Father Early has not yet returned, goes looking for him. He finds the priest in the club car, where he has engaged the endangered young man in conversation with the clear intent of keeping him away from the young woman to save him. The bishop then begins to realize

What a delicate instrument for good a simple man could be! Perhaps Father Early was only a fool, a ward of heaven, not subject to the usual penalties for meddling. No, it was zeal, and people, however far gone, still expected it from a man of God. But even so, Father Early ought to be more careful, humbler before the mystery of iniquity. And still . . .

In a few moments Father Early leaves to visit the lavatory, obviously expecting the bishop to carry on, but the young man bolts at once. Father Early, returning, "didn't appear to blame the bishop at all." He is not discouraged; he simply shifts his attack. As the bishop leaves the club car Father Early is already softening the waiter up with baseball talk, preparatory, the bishop suspects, to lecturing him on the iniquity of tipping. Coming into his own car, he sees the young man disappearing into the room out of which, earlier, he had seen a youth attached to the pilgrimage group emerge. Then:

The Bishop slept well that night, after all, but not before he thought of Father Early still out there, on his feet and trying, which was what counted in the sight of God, not success. *Think-est thou that I cannot ask my Father, and he will not give me presently more than twelve legions of angels?*

The story ends in a few lines. We see the bishop, who has learned his lesson (or had his epiphany experience), as a voluntary member of the pilgrimage.

The moral and artistic achievement of this story is involved with the way it moves through successive levels of complexity, each one deeper than the last, forcing the bishop (and the reader) to re-evaluate, without entirely rejecting, what has already seemed sufficiently clear. As the story opens, and Father Early begins to fit into a familiar category, the reader suspects that a canting bore is about to be caught in full stride, as Powers had earlier caught the snobbish and worldly monsignor in "The Forks" or the frightful housekeeper in "The Valiant Woman." This expectation is fed throughout most of the story, as it must be if subsequent levels are to have the force of genuine discovery. The bishop breaks through to the next level when he sees what Father Early is up to in the club car and realizes what credit must be given him, presumptuous and imprudent though he may be. The final level is the one the bishop arrives at just before he falls asleep: the importance of trying, not success, in the eyes of God. This is nothing more, really, than a realization of what he has known intellectually most of his life. But it is no simple realization. We are familiar enough with the irony of good intentions and harmful results, our delight in which may be nothing more than a despair of goodness; but here we must face the more disturbing irony of the value for good of good intentions that may produce harmful results in a man who is still a bore and ought to be "humbler before the mystery of iniquity." And we must hold in mind also the fact that the bishop has seen in Father Early's extravagance of zeal his own deficiency.

I have treated "Zeal" at this length because it seems to me so characteristic of Powers' ability to realize virtue in contexts where it must not only earn its way in a fair struggle with evil but be seen finally as very complexly, but not hopelessly, involved with it. Thus in "The Presence of Grace" the eccentric and taciturn old pastor ("the doormouse"), who has all the signs of an ineffective, even harmful, shepherd of his flock, is nevertheless the only one good and wise enough to set everyone straight about a slandered woman. In "The Green Banana" it is the apparently useless Father John, a poor preacher and a writer of out-dated religious pamphlets, who reveals goodness to the selfish and proud Father Urban by enduring an expensive lunch he does not want (and getting tipsy in the middle of it) simply out of friendship. In "The Forks" Father Eudex is defined in his sincerity and idealism by the monsignor's pomp and circum-

stance; but when the young priest flushes down the toilet the goodwill check sent to him by the tractor company, his virtue, without being cancelled out, is qualified by the element of self-dramatization that also clarifies its naive excess. But perhaps a more widely known example of the moral complexity of Powers' stories (which is also the real-life complexity of the Christian's world) is the beautiful "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does." Here the dying priest Didymus struggles against his egoism to achieve the humility of simple Brother Titus, and fails, it seems to him, though "with his whole will he tried to lose himself in the sight of God."

Indeed, it might often strike one that there is an old-fashioned quality in Powers' work. I refer not only to the explicit detail with which, in stories like "The Presence of Grace" and "A Losing Game" the meaning of the action is made clear to a central intelligence, but to a radical optimism about the human condition. In the world of Powers' fiction people can be genuinely likable and lovable; goodness can be movingly revealed to them; they can recognize evil both in and apart from themselves; they can change for the better.

Obviously Powers is not unique in this respect in American fiction. You can find all of these characteristics in much of Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson, for instance, and they are preëminently in the fiction of Robert Penn Warren. Nevertheless, Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* remains one of our most prototypical stories: man with his illusion of free will and his great ignorance about himself is doomed to waste himself straining for ends which, when he reaches them, give no satisfaction. We almost expect the characters in our fiction to sound as if they had been created by writers who have never recovered from the fourth book of *Gulliver*, or who have taken it as their personal mission to prove that enlightened humanism is a pipedream. Thus it is that when one compares Powers with such contemporaries as Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, Paul Bowles, Mary McCarthy and J. D. Salinger, he is likely to strike one as being completely out of the American grain.

Certainly Powers is in whole or in part unacceptable to or often misunderstood by a great number of readers who, because of his subjects or the quality of his perception, ought otherwise to enjoy him. There are, for instance, those of his own faith who are uneasy with what seems to them a lack of proper

reverence and reticence, as if, having had special access to the inside dope about rectories and monasteries, he ought to feel himself bound like a confessor to silence. When one chooses to write as a realist about clergymen and the religious life it is inevitable that he will disturb those who have not yet learned to distinguish between the story as art and the story as uplift. Catholic readers are like readers of any other or no religious persuasion: vast numbers of them expect stories to celebrate in rather obvious ways what is most valuable to them in life.

When writers satisfy this expectation one very usual result is melodramatic fiction. Powers does not write this expected melodrama. He writes about a day in the life of Father Burner, the Prince of Darkness, at forty-three "four times transferred, seventeen years an ordained priest, a curate yet and only." Father Burner is strikingly not the idealized priest of popular religious fiction, who at the most is allowed, à la Bruce Marshall, a few humanizing and lovable foibles. But that is the point of him. The Prince is a most Catholic portrait, in the tradition of Chaucer's Monk and Friar. Father Burner is both a very individualized person and Everyman: a lukewarm, slothful time-server, measured and found wanting by his own values. His concrete universality is established with wit and great clarity; the achievement of him as a character in a work of art lies to a great extent in his ordinariness. Yet "Prince of Darkness" read properly is a spiritual horror story, the more remarkable because it achieves its effects without the extravagance and violence we are accustomed to in revelations of horror.

At the same time Father Burner is treated with a compassion that never becomes sentimentality. "Prince" is evidence of Powers' ability to find the distance from his subject that is just right for his realist's purpose. To get farther from Father Burner (this is the lesson of the first book of *Gulliver*) is to turn him into a clinical specimen for the pure satirist; to get closer to him is to risk drowning him in "new" all-forgiving compassion. Thus the priest's yearning for a parish of his own where his disappointed mother can be his housekeeper (a touch that helps to complicate the portrait by revealing the priest as a suffering, not simply comically erring, human being) might at one extreme be a sentimentality coolly observed and at the other a sentimentality that takes in both author and reader. It is the function of realism at its best to protect the artist from such extremes:

to keep him from the abstraction of satire and the indiscriminate-ness of sentimentality, so that the object-in-the-round can be held in sympathetic and critical control. The devotees of popular religious fiction find the view from this realistic position strange and unreal.

From such a position Father Burner cannot be literally the Prince of Darkness. In the theologian's terms, he only manifests the Prince effectively at work. In the popular moral melodrama of the idealized priest, of course, he becomes the Prince, since he is unthinkable as a priest. But the world of such fiction is not really very Christian; indeed, there is a leaven of Manichaeism in it, which is a way of saying, among other things, that it does not recognize Mr. Trilling's ambivalence. It is a simplistic, Cartesian world of black and white in which, one gets the uneasy impression, to be less than all white is to be damned—as if we were back in Governor Winthrop's seventeenth-century world where "the least known evils are not to be tolerated."

Paradoxically, the genuine Christian realist, though he has much to do with the Prince at work, has no business damning his characters. Characters are damned in moral melodrama, and they are damned by writers who have lost faith in human goodness, for whom (as one suspects of writers as different as Mary McCarthy and Truman Capote) everyone is damned. Father Burner, like Father Didymus, Father Urban in "The Green Banana," and Mac in the picaresque "The Devil Was the Joker," is neither damned nor saved. He is simply observed, as he must be by the Christian realist, as a member of Langland's "fair field of folk" between the "Tower on the toft artfully fashioned" and the "deep vale beneath with a dungeon in it."

As if to emphasize this point, Father Burner, now a curate at another parish, reappears in two later stories, "Death of a Favorite" and "Defection of a Favorite," in both of which the narrator is Fritz, the rector's pampered cat. Each of these stories, with its finical old maid's style, is technically accomplished. Each can be objected to on the grounds that it leans too much on "Prince of Darkness," in which the character of the priest is presented with a finality of detail. "Death of a Favorite" especially, since it tells us nothing we do not already know about Father Burner, reads like an anecdotal footnote to "Prince." But in "Defection of a Favorite" the aged rector, Father Malt, ends up in the hospital after an accidental fall, and

Father Burner not only becomes acting pastor but apparently has a good chance to become official pastor. It is here, in a story that is not his best effort, Powers displays again his Christian realist's concept of the reciprocity between character and circumstance. The position of authority has a creative effect upon Father Burner; unsuspected administrative abilities appear in him as he takes the run-down parish in hand. Even Fritz, who has been his mortal enemy, must admit that he is a changed man.

But the pastor finally returns, "as one risen from the dead," and the two priests confront each other "like two popes themselves not sure which one was real." Then Father Burner

went up to Father Malt, laid a strong, obedient hand on the old one that held tight to the right crutch, and was then the man he'd been becoming.

"Hello, boss," he said. "Glad you're back."

Fritz concludes with smug irony that provides the necessary realist's qualification for Father Burner's change without denying its reality:

It was his finest hour. In the past, he had lacked the will to accept his setbacks with grace and had derived no merit from them. It was difficult to believe that he'd profited so much from my efforts in his behalf—my good company and constant example. I was happy for him.

This reading, I am aware, is unacceptable to readers who cannot concede the possibility of moral improvement. For them it is not Burner's finest hour: instead, perhaps, here is Burner balked again, attempting comically to accept his setback with good grace, and what Fritz's irony conveys is the lack of moral improvement. This is the result of one kind of realism.

Realism, like any other mode of fiction, is meant to liberate, but it can, as Francis Fergusson points out in *The Idea of a Theater*, become a strait jacket in which the artist squirms with frustration, unable to touch meaning he knows is there. This is partly because of realism's historical involvement with philosophical attitudes that severely limit the idea of what is real and valuable in experience. It is not right to say that realism has made it impossible to imagine heroism or virtue or goodness, but it has made such imagining difficult for everybody and

impossible for some, who for other reasons as well are confined to the empirical surface of life.

Thus for many readers Powers is only tolerable insofar as he can be seen as uncommitted to many of the values of the world most of his stories exist in, for this is the world of illusion. For these readers the realist is permitted to observe the world of illusion with humor, irony, even sympathy, but not with acceptance. Stories like "Prince of Darkness," "The Valiant Woman," "The Lord's Day," and "The Devil Was the Joker," for instance, have coherence and meaning for this kind of realism, even if there is something left over in them it cannot reach. But stories like "Zeal," "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does," "A Couple of Nights Before Christmas," and "The Presence of Grace" are another matter. Unless a great deal in them can be written off as the vagaries the artist should be allowed (as Marx allowed them to Heine), or be made the subject of an athletic and temporary suspension of disbelief, they will be marked down the way we all tend to mark down stories that offend our sense of reality. I suspect that they are very often so marked down; for the likely thing, as a matter of practical fact, is that the writer will now as always be judged both as maker and revealer of truth. And practically speaking again, deficiencies in making will be more tolerable than deficiencies in seeing—may even, as with Whitman and Thomas Wolfe, be taken as signs of authentic vision. Powers, in short, may bother many of his fellow Catholics because he is too realistic, but he bothers many outside the fold because he is not realistic enough. Conclusive proof of an unresolved conflict in his work might satisfy both parties, but for different reasons.

I have said that Powers may strike one as not being in the American grain. There are certain characteristics of modern American fiction—its love affair with the violent and abnormal, its pastoral preoccupation with innocence, its antinomian glorification of social misfits and rejects—that are not in his work or there in a diminished degree. Readers who come to him from Bowles, McCullers, Capote, or Vidal are likely to find him low-keyed and his universe over-controlled and too well-lighted. Even Catholics prefer Graham Greene and, old-fashioned as he may strike them, Mauriac.

Powers can, however, sound quite contemporarily violent on occasion, for instance in "The Trouble," "The Eye," and "He

Don't Pick Cotton," stories which are concerned with Negroes. In the first a Negro mother lies dying, having been wounded by a mob of whites. Present are her young son (the narrator), her grief-maddened husband, one of the white rioters who has been given sanctuary from Negro pursuers, and a priest. In "The Eye" an innocent Negro is accused of raping the girl he saved from drowning and is then lynched. In "He Don't Pick Cotton" three Negro musicians are fired from their jobs after they refuse to be the subservient darkies some Southern patrons want them to be.

Powers handles these tense situations effectively, especially in "He Don't Pick Cotton," in which the young Negress picks up the story exuberantly. The Negroes in these stories have the status of persons; they are not simply means that advance an attitude towards a cause. Nevertheless, these stories are not the best of Powers. Perhaps stories of this kind are too easy to handle, coming to the writer, as they do, with too much built-in tension and drama so that they do not challenge him sufficiently. But more important, it seems to me, is the fact that Powers needs more emotional distance between himself and his subject. There is a charge of anger in these stories which does him credit as a man but oversimplifies him as an artist.

Violence, of course, is relative, and it is also the artist's indispensable tool. In violence the issues of life and art are hyperbolically clarified; or take it in Karl Jasper's words: "The essence of man becomes conscious of itself in ultimate situations." Nevertheless, one must distinguish in theory, however hard it may be to distinguish in fact, between the violence of clarification and revelation (Faulkner, Penn Warren) and a number of less pure varieties: violence for its own sake (Spillane, Cain, much of Caldwell); violence as a surrogate for religious or mystical experience or as a search for meaning (Salinger, Bowles, Henry Miller); and violence as a despair of meaning (James Jones, Kerouac). The categories and examples may be open to argument, but it seems to me beyond question that there is a widespread tendency in America to take extreme displays of violence as the sign of the true writer, as if to confront the violent is automatically to confront the meaningful. Add to this the related and romantic fondness for the agony-insight formula and it is easy to see how second- and third-raters with a reportorial knack for a harrowing situation are so often mistaken for the

real thing.

The imagination of evil in such a violent literature has a tendency to be melodramatic and naïve, and undefined by a corresponding ability to imagine good, often because it is an expression of the despair of goodness that follows from the American habit of expecting too much from human nature. There is something very typical in Owen Wister's discovery that a Western rogue was not "the mixed dish of cambric tea so dear to the modern novelists. He is just bad through and through, without a scruple and without an affection." A naïveté about goodness breeds a naïveté about evil: the movie magazines breed the confidentials. Both extremes can be disguised as realism; both tend to the distortions of melodrama.

But in most of Powers' stories the confrontation of evil is—relative to the majority of his contemporaries—a small and unexciting thing. Powers' situations have, as they must have if they are to be stories, their own kind of extremity. The hunting excursion through the basement of the church in "A Losing Game," with its suggestion of an African safari, or Father Udovic's tracking down of the sender of the mysterious letter to the Pope in "Dawn," are good examples. Nevertheless, Powers asks us to believe a hard thing about evil and virtue: that they do not necessarily make a great noise in the world. Evil is the officious small-mindedness of Father Udovic or the sloth of Father Burner; it is the naïveté of Father Faber in "The Presence of Grace" or of Miles in "The Devil Was the Joker"; it is the possessiveness of Mrs. Stoner in "The Valiant Woman," the selfishness of Father Didymus in "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does," and the lack of imagination in the eccentric pastor of "The Lord's Day." Powers, like Wordsworth, chooses "incidents and situations from common life," and the choice costs him readers at a time when, as Wordsworth complained in his own time, the taste is for "outrageous stimulation."

Yet these small human and moral events are realized in intense drama. Events in themselves as unspectacular as a neighborhood drop-in party ("Blue Island") or a game of honeymoon bridge between pastor and housekeeper ("The Valiant Woman") assume the dimensions and human significance that a writer like James Jones misses in spite of the apparent advantage of his subjects. Powers, in fact, is like Henry James and Emily Dickinson, those earlier Palefaces, in that he often seems to us

to have succeeded in spite of near insuperable handicaps, as if he were an amputee that had learned to drive. And, like James and Dickinson, he can also remind us, rather uncomfortably, that in art it is not the event so much as the quality and intensity of the imagination that apprehends it that is important.

Powers also sounds contemporary enough for other reasons in "The Poor Thing," "Blue Island," and "Jamesie." In the first two stories he reminds one of Capote. In "The Poor Thing" Teresa's naïveté and indecision make her an easy victim to Dolly, a morbidly selfish cripple. In "Blue Island" Ethel, another innocent, is easily victimized by the frightful Mrs. Hancock, the saleswoman organizer of get-acquainted parties. Both of these stories end in a kind of darkness that is unusual in Powers. Teresa returning to Dolly reminds one of Mrs. Miller discovering, in Capote's "Miriam," that the monstrous child, whom she had thought herself free of, is back in her apartment. "Blue Island" ends almost unbearably with Ethel at the window watching her husband, who had expected so much of the disastrous party, approach the house "carrying a big club of roses."

Such stories belong in a familiar story world (American Othello-land) where innocence has no chance. More typical of Powers, and therefore more complexly realized, is Mac, the corrupt salesman of religious articles in "The Devil Was the Joker." Miles, the unarmored innocent in this story, develops armor in his relations with Mac. Mac is a necessary part of his growing up, which in Powers' fiction is a necessary and good thing.

In "Jamesie" the boy Jamesie discovers that the man he idolizes, a pitcher on the town baseball team, is just as corrupt as the bad men in his favorite books. The story belongs in a class with Hemingway's "My Old Man" and Anderson's "I Want to Know Why." Anderson's story seems to me the best of these three, though it suffers now from resembling Hemingway's in its details, while Hemingway's seems the most sentimental. But what strikes me as significant is the fact that in Powers' story the innocent's encounter with the adult world of evil is less traumatic than it is in the other two stories. Jamesie, having left the jail where his disillusion with his hero has been complete, "did not go through alleys, across lots, between buildings, over fences" as he had coming to the jail, but "used the streets and sidewalks like everyone else . . ." The treatment makes it possible

to see Jamesie's experience as painful but necessary, shocking but educating. In Anderson's story the reader is confined more completely to the bewilderment of the adolescent narrator; and it is easy to imagine Hemingway's boy carrying the traumatic experience through life, and thus remaining an innocent.

In "Jamesie" and "The Trouble" Powers demonstrates his ability to enter sympathetically into the world of youthful innocence, but without being caught up in the kind of mythic preoccupation with this world that has led Dwight Macdonald to ask: "Why are our writers so much more at home with children than adults?" There are really many answers to this question and not all of them apply to every writer who is at home with children. Mr. Macdonald's question might seem to imply a general weakness in American writing and so make us overlook the fact that our writers' way with children is often their strength: the strength of a passionate concern for the innocence and simplicity missing in the corrupt adult world; the strength of a passionate concern for the heroic and poetic, for to children heroism and poetry are valid things. The weakness lies in the extent to which in this "child" literature a pastoral yearning for the clear vision and spontaneous virtue of childhood is the expression of a personal defeat or of despair: an inability to contend with the complexities and obligations of adult civilized life; an inability to accept time and change; an inability to love.

But ultimately it is innocence, rather than the mask of childhood or adolescence the writer so often assumes, that is the important thing. Figures otherwise as different as Salinger's Holden Caulfield, West's Miss Lonelyhearts, Welty's Daniel Ponder, Algren's Dove Linkhorn, Saroyan's Aram, Hemingway's Old Man, Lardner's ball players, Runyan's major and minor criminals, Steinbeck's Cannery Row outcasts, even some of Vidal's homosexuals and Kerouac's hipsters, have the appeal of innocence humorously, tragically, sentimentally, or anarchically at odds with the Enemy, which is society. Implicitly or explicitly this literature of innocence is social criticism, and taken as a whole it is an important opposition to the excesses (themselves childlike) of a materialistic, selfish, and over-complicated society. But its innocence is too often a crippling innocence, and its attack on the Enemy is too often stereotyped and perverse. It is the innocence of an experience with Eden that, as Alfred Kazin puts it, has kept so many American writers "from being

able to confront the world east of it without confusion."

It is against the background of such a preoccupation with innocence that Powers' stories are particularly meaningful, for his assumption is that man's place is in society, in the complex, adult, civilized world. The optimistic, humanistic and Christian implication of the whole body of his work to date is that man not only can grow up and live in society but is meant to. This comes through in his work even through his "society" is for the most part a very restricted and special one. In the conflict between nature and nurture Powers is instinctively on the side of nurture. It is by no means an unusual position; it simply seems so to many Americans. It is the position of writers as different as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Coleridge, Henry James, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Penn Warren. It is the position that assumes that man is a limited social creature of mixed good and evil whose virtue must be earned in situations so complex that the weak will be tempted to despair or to escape into utopian dreams.

Powers, of course, is less than any of these writers. He is not—at least, he is not yet—a great writer. In terms of what we expect of a great short story writer he has written too little and his range is too limited. Nevertheless, he is at his best a very good writer and the level of his writing is consistently high. His controlled, delicate, and poetic style expresses a highly original combination of humor, sympathy, and irony and is skillfully adjusted to a variety of voices. It is important for American fiction that he is part of a counter-balancing movement away from the preoccupation with violence, adolescence, and an almost compulsive assumption that society is the Enemy. He is one of those writers who has found a way to solve what André Malraux, in the October, 1945, *Horizon*, called the great problem of American literature: how "to intellectualize itself without losing its direct approach."

GONZAGA UNIVERSITY

J. F. POWERS: On the Vitality of Disorder

GEORGE SCOUFFAS

The true business of literature . . . is to remind the powers that be . . . of the turbulence they have to control. There is a disorder vital to the individual which is fatal to society. And the other way round is also true.

—R. P. Blackmur, *The Lion and the Honeycomb*

In the story "A Couple of Nights Before Christmas," Father John, timid, self-effacing, one who "had just got by, even by Clementine standards," manages a transcendent moment of reconciliation between Father Urban and Father Wilf. The latter two have been characteristically sparring, this time over the literal, puristic observance of Christmas; Father John simply and quietly points out the absurdity of Father Wilf's literalism and then adroitly prevents Father Urban from taking advantage of the situation by offering himself as a "sacrifice" through the losing of a checker game to Father Urban. Significantly, however, Father John breaks this moment of "rare peace" with a brief return to the details of the controversy: "For a moment they had all been lifted up, and this was Jack's way of letting them down lightly to earth." It is only after this "release" or reaction that Father Urban consummates the new-found conviviality by suggesting they "open one of Billy's bottles," a gift of a rich commercial-secular supporter of the Clementines.

This conclusion to the story is typical of Powers. Most characteristic, perhaps, is its pendulum-like use of motivation, reaction rebounding from reaction, made necessary by Powers' close attention to the psychological friction among his characters. Although this friction is frequently revealed through apparently trivial thought and act, often comic in effect, it is rooted in the deadly serious effort of each character to establish his identity

¹ Appeared in *The New Yorker*, XXX (December 21, 1957), pp. 28-36.

and authority in the scheme of things. Competitiveness is central in Powers' work, whether he is using the secular world or the tight world of the Church. In its extreme manifestation it operates as a sort of psychological cannibalism, as in "The Poor Thing," or in "He Don't Plant Cotton," where it is compounded by racial antagonism. In such stories as "The Old Bird, a Love Story" and "Blue Island" it takes on more sociological implications. It is in the stories involving the Catholic Church, however, that it operates most complexly. There is a feinting and maneuvering toward the settling of "hierarchic" structures. This is evident in the relationship between Father Wilf and Father Urban. And in "Death of a Favorite" the clerical skirmishing is reflected in the lay ushers' vying with each other for the establishment of position in their relation to Father Malt. The competitive agitation leads to a distinctive developmental pattern in Powers' stories. Most typical is a centripetal movement that begins on the outskirts of things, with the inconspicuous, literal, mundane detail, and slowly whirls in toward a still point of revelation that in a sense negates all hierarchies. The protagonist is at least temporarily freed of the compulsion to maintain self, sees himself and others as victims of a condition endemic to humanity, glimpses and responds to a motivation that operates as an antidote—that is, there is a release from the pressure of self-interest, with the concomitant experiencing of compassion and even of love. Even Father Burner, the priest-character in Powers who most self-consciously and violently attitudinizes and postures and covets, who seems the least suitable to the priesthood, experiences this moment of release when Father Malt, his superior, hobbles back from his hospital bed to resume his duties at the end of "Defection of a Favorite." For the first time Father Burner sees Father Malt as a man and not simply as position, although there is also the implication that he finally recognizes the unassailability of his position under the authority of the Church.

Father John, who has once before been the instrument of spiritual education for Father Urban, in "The Green Banana," is out of the swim. He has retired to the shallows and to apparent contentedness, to be looked on with some pity by his more competitive colleagues. Naïve, humble, he seems to be without ulterior motives; yet he, too, has not completely given up the

struggle for self-assertion. In "A Couple of Nights Before Christmas," Father Urban, who has been regularly victimized and who therefore is well-qualified to know, is aware that Father John continues the fight under the guise of playing checkers: "Jack certainly got back at the world in checkers."² This transference of basic motive is made especially clear when Father Urban's running conflict with Father Wilf is indirectly referred to as a game: ". . . it was Father Urban's move in the other game—the one he was playing with Jack. . . ." When Father John, at the crucial moment, sacrifices his game to Father Urban, he is sacrificing self, and Father Urban knows it.

Some important questions must be asked concerning the ending of "A Couple of Nights Before Christmas." Why isn't the euphoria established by the self-sacrifice of Father John permitted to remain in its initial purity? Why is he compelled to break the mood? Why, in effect, does Powers add a reactionary uncoiling of meaning or, to change the figure, an antistrophic revelation? Fully considered answers to these questions will reveal much of Powers' fundamental views of reality and experience and of his relationship to his art. A close look at two of his other stories, "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does" and "Look How the Fish Live," will be helpful toward reaching some basic conclusions.

Almost fifteen years separate the writing of the two stories. "Lions" appeared initially in *Accent* in 1943 and, owing to its having been frequently reprinted, is one of Powers' best-known stories. "Look How the Fish Live," printed in *The Reporter* (October 31, 1957), is one of his most recent. Yet both are studies of first principles, although they approach what actually is the same central problem from opposite poles: one working through the subtle, labyrinthine motivation of mysticism, the other in tone and detail being fixed in an almost empiric, direct observation of nature and man. Alfred Kazin, in his review of the volume *The Presence of Grace*, uses the "formula of Simone Weil" to describe the characteristic conflict in Powers' work as between "grace" and "gravity," "ideal beauty" and "reality."³ In these terms it may be said that "Lions" is essen-

² Cf. the card game in "The Valiant Woman," in which Mrs. Stoner "played for blood."

³ "Gravity and Space," *New Republic*, CXXXIV (April 30, 1956), pp. 19-20.

tially grace-centered, "Look How the Fish Live" gravity-centered, yet each clearly partakes of the other. Both show the "purity" of effort that is the result of the sustained application of the author's will to the exploration of a fundamental issue, though "Look How the Fish Live" has a surface lightness lacking in "Lions."

In commenting on "Lions," in an undated letter, Powers mentions the "perils of mysticism."⁴ His protagonist, Didymus, is acutely sensitive to these perils. Physically ill and spiritually tortured by the thought that he has erred in deciding not to visit his friend Seraphin before his death, he realizes that

his predicament could only be resolved through means more serious than he dared cope with. It would be like refusing to see Seraphin all over again. By some mistake, he protested, he had at last been placed in a position vital with meaning and precedents inescapably Christian. But was he the man for it? Unsure of himself, he was afraid to go on trial. It would be no minor trial, so construed, but one in which the greatest values were involved—a human soul and the means of its salvation or damnation.

He rejects this supernal court of judgment, or, rather, he disqualifies himself as unworthy of this attention. Instead he decides for health and life and is willing to "count the divine hand not there." This decision he considers a weakness and a confession of his ultimate spiritual failure: "He simply desired to walk and in a few years to die a normal, uninspired death." But this conclusion, like most of the conclusions he reaches, is thwarted or countered, both literally by his death soon after and psychologically by his clear realization of the imprisonment and meanness his life has represented and of the vitality of meaning in death itself. It is in this new clarity of vision that he finally "feels" what he has always known: the basic paradox of death-in-life and life-in-death. It is at this moment that he requests Titus to open the window and that he finds he can pray. Soon after, the canary, which to this point has shown no inclination

⁴ All letters quoted in this article were written to Charles H. Shattuck, of the editorial staff of *Accent*. The author wishes to acknowledge the generosity of Mr. Shattuck, who made the entire correspondence available for this study, and of Mr. Powers, who has given permission to print excerpts.

to take advantage of its release from its cage, escapes to certain death in the snow, thus illustrating the synonymy of absolute freedom and death. Now Didymus makes the supreme mystical effort "to lose himself in the sight of God," but fails. Instead, he has to "look outside, to Titus," who in turn is looking outside, through the window, for signs of the canary, thus reflecting Didymus's own failure, but ironically, for Didymus sees in Titus genuine "sanctity." At the end, in his last thought, Didymus wonders: "How long would it be . . . before Titus ungrievingly gave up the canary for lost in the snowy arms of God?"

The nature of the preoccupation of Didymus, schooled all his life in the minute contemplation of theological and mystical problems and disciplines, inevitably leads to a hall-of-mirrors effect in the development of his conflict, with each mirror reflecting the obverse of the image in its opposite. Almost every act, every motive, every thought and conclusion inevitably creates its own counter. The story thus moves throughout on paradox and irony. Every element in the story supports this effect, in a remarkable fusion or suspension of diversities. However, the inherent abstruseness of the central action is made concrete and active through as full a use of descriptive resources as Powers has ever permitted himself. A close reading of the story will reveal a fundamental pattern of alignment of motifs that carry the burden of meaning. This alignment may be analyzed in terms of fixity and fluidity, order and disorder. At one extreme is the ultimate divine order that is the object of the mystical discipline, at the other the flux, irrationality, and amorality of nature. Antagonistic to each other, nevertheless these two forces, except in the rarest of instances, cannot be mutually exclusive of each other. If there is a divinity of order, there is also a corresponding "divinity" of disorder. Now and then a human being appears who manages an utter participation in divine order, but, as Didymus well knows, he accomplishes this wrenching free from material nature only through the fierce temptation of "Despair." Figuratively he pulls himself out of his skin; he purges himself of his humanity. Such a person keeps active at its outermost limits the saving possibility of moral perfection, but at the fearful price of falling out of nature.

Throughout "Lions" there is a constant interplay between these forces, on several levels. The internal conflict in Didymus

swings wildly between them, and his response to external events and objects is a projection of this internal battle. Since both Didymus and Titus are Franciscans, they are committed to searching for the ideal of moral unity. Didymus, perpetually unsure of himself, imagines that Titus has achieved it. Titus is the "prototype" of the humble, childlike, apparently unselfed individual that Powers frequently employs as an agent of revelation. He is, for example, the forerunner of Father John and of the pastor in "The Presence of Grace," although he is obviously much closer to saintliness than either. In fact, if any character in Powers' stories deserves to be called a saint, it is Titus. He is the only one who can speak in texts and quotations without sounding glib or hypocritical. His mind moves "pathetically largo"; his body is beyond the effects of nature. Although Didymus needs woolen socks against the winter cold when the two go walking, Titus's feet are bare in open sandals. And when a piece of ice lodges between his toes it does not melt. This impresses Didymus. Indeed, Didymus is so much impressed by him that he catches himself "duplicating every aspect of Titus in motion," and together they seem "peripatetic figures in a Gothic frieze." Here is a fundamental image of immobility or fixity. But this is an illusion which Didymus needs and fosters. On their return from their walk, a scene takes place that clearly reveals how much of Titus's "completeness" is willed by Didymus himself. They meet the Rector, who reminds Titus that he has given him a telegram for Didymus. While Didymus is reading of the death of Seraphin, he becomes aware of a marked perturbation in Titus and attributes it to an intuitive knowledge of the contents of the telegram: "Titus's eyes were both fixed and lowered in sorrow . . . Didymus was suddenly weak, as before a miracle." The Rector, however, supplies a commonplace motive for Titus's sorrow when he explains it as the result of his forgetfulness in not delivering the telegram. It is significant that Didymus is relieved at the re-establishment of reality.

On another level, Seraphin offers a parallel to this relationship between Didymus and Titus in his lifetime effort toward the canonization of Fra Bartolomeo. In Didymus's dream of Seraphin the latter says:

. . . you will laugh or have me excommunicated for wanton presumption, though it's only faith in a faithless age, making a

vow not to die until he's made a saint, recognized rather—he is one, convinced of it . . . a saint sure as I'm alive. . . .

Thus does he point up the dedicated desire of Didymus and himself (obviously the two had discussed this when they were together) and the dangers and difficulties and rareness of its fulfillment.

In no other of his works does Powers make as full and complex use of nature as he does in "Lions," though nature is present in one form or another in most of his stories, often in a central role. The whole of "Lions" is set against a snowy, wintry landscape, and the last image Didymus experiences is of snow "darkly falling." The impression is one of nature quiescent, static, eternally fixed and purified. Although Didymus suffers from this coldness, Titus seems attuned to it. It is interesting that early in the story Didymus becomes conscious of "some old unmelted snow in tree crotches" that "lay dirty and white in the gathering dark." And the day after his collapse, sitting at the window, he first notices the melting of the snow and then experiences a disintegration of the landscape into riotous living movement. When he shuts his eyes against it, "the background of darkness became a field of varicolored factions, warring, and, worse than the landscape, things like worms and comets wriggled and exploded. . . ." It is during this experience of chaos that Titus brings in the caged canary, nature controlled and imprisoned. And soon thereafter Didymus, by limiting his view to the trees nearest him, manages to restore order: "Watching the raindrops prove gravity, he was grateful for nature's, rather than his, return to reason. . . . There was order, he thought. . . ." The consolation of this particular sort of order has already been prepared for by the information that Didymus has been a teacher of geometry, "because it was useful and eternally true, like his theology, and though of a lower order of truth it escaped the common fate of theology and the humanities, perverted through the ages in the mouths of dunderheads and fools." When Didymus and Seraphin are comparing achievements in the dream sequence, Didymus offers his interest in Pythagoras as answer to Seraphin's attempt to canonize Fra Bartolomeo. Didymus, however, feels self-conscious, knowing how unequal the balance is. He is too content with the empirically certain truths—too "prudent," as he thinks later when he determines

to get well.

Another major example of the role nature plays in the projection of Didymus's dilemma is the already mentioned extraordinary dream of Didymus, brought on by his anguish over Seraphin's death. The entire dream is actually a mythic experience in nature, very closely wrought. In the opening image, Didymus and Seraphin, standing "on an eminence," see a river "spiraling brown coil on coil under the golden sun" as it "slithered across the blue and flower-flecked land." They mistake it "with pleasure for an endless murmuring serpent. They considered unafraid the prospect of its turning in its course and standing on tail to swallow them gurgling alive. They sensed it was in them to command this also by a wish." Laughingly they mention the name of Jonah and descend to walk "up and down the brown belly of the river in mock distress. Above them, foolishly triumphant . . . mewed the waves." Below them swims an occasional large fish and the bottom is swarming with crustacea. After "strolling" for hours, they speak of "ordinary things," beginning with the deaths of their parents and their funerals: "The sound of dirt descending six feet to clatter on the coffins was memorable but unmentionable." Then they discuss their own lives, as already summarized above. At this moment "a crayfish pursued them, clad in sable armor, dearly desiring to do battle, brandishing hinged swords." The crayfish eventually catches Didymus at the knee and at the back, and Seraphin says, "If you like, we'll leave—only I do like it here. Well, go ahead then, you never did like St. Louis. . . ." Didymus rises to the surface, to the blinding brightness of the sun. He now awakes, "face to face with a flame," which he avoids. Once again he looks at the flame, on his hands and knees, "blinking dumbly, a four-legged beast." He is raised by Titus, whereupon he asks Titus to "put out the candle."

What is most evident in this experience is that it is self-willed. It is a voluntary immersion into the teeming disorder of nature, a willful distortion of a beautiful, ordered landscape. Yet this is also presented as a fantastic game. The traditional symbol of temptation, the serpent, is created by them mockingly, and the primeval nature about them is viewed condescendingly. When inevitably their thoughts turn to death, the harshest truth in nature, it is treated as "ordinary" and ultimately as

"unmentionable." Finally, when the game turns serious with the challenge of the crayfish, Didymus escapes, refusing the engagement. Significantly Seraphin remains behind. The entire sequence thus becomes an ironic re-enactment of the Jonah story. Jonah was purged through the actual experience of the fury and terror of nature. Later, in an instant of clarity, Didymus sees himself as having been "tied down, caged, stunted in his apostolate, seeking the crumbs . . . neglecting the source." He realizes that "in trivial attachments, in love of things, was death, no matter the appearance of life. In the highest attachment only, no matter the appearance of death, was life." This is an establishing of the issues, but it is yet no final solution. It is a double-edged clarity, for there is the death which is the evidence and the price of material existence, as well as the mystical death or deadness to the living world. And by avoiding the dangers and the responsibilities of one, does not one risk forfeiting the other? There is an ultimate freedom and a "highest attachment" in a genuine involvement in the "disorder" of nature as well as in the perfect unity of loss of self. Didymus has been caught between the two, avoiding the one and yet unable to experience completely the other. The "abecedarian observance" of the Franciscan vows which represent an imposed order has led only to "literal" limitation, actually preventing him from fully understanding the "flux of circumstance" they were designed to help him transcend.

In the blinding light he awakes to after his dream Didymus feels this. For the first time, perhaps, he is fully struck by his corporeality, which intimately relates him to all creatures. In view of his lifelong effort to escape this state, this is a poignantly demeaning realization, yet it is also a salutary one. At this stage he rejects the light. His rejection has at least a twofold reason. Painfully conscious of the baseness of his humanity, he feels himself unprepared, unfit for it. But since he is also anguished over what he considers his desertion of a loved friend and brother, he rejects what it signifies of his being "caged" against his humanity. Later, at the moment when he identifies his captivity with that of the canary, he muses on the possibility that "human love was all he was fitted for."

Just before the end of the story, after the last sacrament has been given Didymus, Titus reads the passage from St. John

of the Cross from which the title of the story is taken:

'Birds of swift wing, lions, harts, leaping does, mountains, valleys, banks, waters, breezes, heats and terrors that keep watch by night, by the pleasant lyres and by the siren's song, I conjure you, cease your wrath and touch not the wall'

Immediately Didymus asks Titus once again to "turn off the light." And in the ensuing darkness, "he saw the full moon had let down a ladder of light through the window." He sees, also, the snow, "strangely blue, falling outside," with an eye and mind so sensitive ("because his body, now faint, no longer blurred his vision?") "he could count the snowflakes, all of them separately. . . ." The light Titus has extinguished is now simply an electric light. The vision of moonlight and snow is one of clarity of insight, of serenity, and of coolness as opposed to the feverishness and hot brightness of the earlier vision.

The story, however, is not yet done. Didymus has reached an important stage in the "cure of the soul":⁵ freedom from the limitations, the distractions, and the disorder of a more strictly material existence. He still has to contend with the basic mystical doctrine that dictated, as he thought, his refusal to see Seraphin: "Unless a man be clearly delivered from the love of all creatures, he may not fully tend to his Creator." This ultimate deliverance he cannot achieve. And it is the final complex irony that he looks to Titus for the revelation, for what he sees is a man attempting to protect him from sorrow over the escape of the canary, a sorrow which Titus himself is experiencing. "The thought of being the cause of such elaborate dissimulation in so simple a soul made Didymus want to smile—or cry, he did not know which. . . ." The story thus ends with the disconcerting vitality of love, the highest product of and antidote to human involvement and, paradoxically, the highest barrier on the passage to divinity.

"Lions" is unique among Powers' stories. Unlike the others, it treats its subject in almost a dialectic manner, relatively free of concessions to particular time and place. This is certainly not

⁵ Powers' phrase, from a letter of September 22, 1945: "The cure of the soul is a science. There are signposts if you can see them which indicate the progress of the soul."

to say that it remains simply argument; indeed, it is fictional art of a high order, with characters of dimension and the complex formal and symbolic structure of art. But this treatment makes necessary the minimizing of the larger world of social activity. In all of his other work, even that which most intensively uses the Church, Powers is obviously interested in the contemporary secular culture and mores. In a letter of March 31, 1951, commenting on Joseph Bennett's story "Armistice Day,"⁶ he says: "I liked the story about the man and woman living the life in New York I think would have been my lot if I'd ever lived there. . . . All stories today should take place in supermarkets; the modern square, battlefield and manger." Related to this interest is his view of his technical problems as a writer. He summarizes a fundamental one in an undated letter written early in 1945:

I have always blended action and comment, usually selecting a good hinge in the action on which to hang comment or characterization . . . My idea is that action and characterization should be joined as a cabinet maker joins wood, matching the grain . . . If it comes to a showdown I have to admit characterization is more important than action. And yet that is to ignore the dramatic aspect, the thing that can turn the blood hot and cold if done right.

The working for the right blend has actually led to an increased emphasis on dramatic action since "Lions." This has resulted in the more extensive development of scene, the greater interplay among characters, particularly through dialogue, and the general opening-up of narrative that are characteristic of such stories as "Prince of Darkness," "The Valiant Woman," "The Devil Was the Joker," and "The Presence of Grace."

* * *

In "Look How the Fish Live" Powers enlarges on a theme he has already used in "The Valiant Woman." At the end of the latter story, Mrs. Stoner, housekeeper to Father Firman, rebukes him for his angry outburst against the female mosquito: "Shame on you, Father. She needs the blood for her eggs." She thereby states a basic naturalistic process and reveals her own

⁶ In *Accent*, XI, Winter, 1951.

participation in it. This is small solace to Father Firman, who is left childishly and furiously pursuing the mosquito in his bedroom. "Look How the Fish Live" is told pretty much as a parable, with application, an approach that displays Powers' ability to impregnate the seemingly inconsequential incident with meaning. The protagonist, unnamed, is one day confronted with the problem, presented him by his children, of keeping alive a baby dove that has somehow fallen out of its primitive nest. Pathetically inadequate to the task, he resents his children's exposing him to such responsibility and is appalled at the apparent unconcern of the parent birds. Inevitably, a cat eventually kills the bird and the protagonist buries it. At this point, Mr. and Mrs. Hahn, neighbors, enter the scene and begin a commonplace, desultory conversation concerning the spraying of mosquitoes which disconcertingly explodes into a wholesale condemnation of nature by the protagonist: "I'm sick of it all . . . Insects, birds, and animals of all kinds. . . ." Hahn, correctly attributing this outburst to the experience with the dove, blandly utters the naturalistic truism, "Look how the fish live." The protagonist, aware that "Mr. Hahn didn't see himself in the picture at all," now includes all of humanity in his protest ("That includes children . . . And women . . . And men"). Soon thereafter a middle-aged woman appears in the interests of civil defense, attempting to enlist the protagonist as warden for his block. He refuses the assignment, not only because in his mood he is unfit for it, but also because ironically his home is to be destroyed to make room for the expansion of the local college: "There's no defense against that either. . . ."

Such a summary of the story shows the spareness of its narrative framework. A closer look will reveal the substance of its thematic development. This story, also, can be conveniently broken down into the countering motifs of order and disorder. The initial image is one of happy order: "It had been a wonderful year in the yard, which was four city lots and full of trees, a small forest and game preserve in the old part of town. Until that day there hadn't been a single casualty. . . ." But this is obviously illusion, which the protagonist has cultivated, having avoided the "casualties" and incidents that "would have been his responsibility." The bringing of the bird to his attention immediately emphasizes how thinly disguised is the violence

that has been constantly active. The protagonist's patent self-deception is summarized in his resentment against the dove's mother, who was "posing on a branch like peace itself, with no thought of anything in her head." Actually the disruption of the illusion bares the moral relationship of the protagonist to a problem he has always known as an inescapable part of reality itself. He affirms the necessary existence of moral sensibility in man, but he is once again brought to an admission of ambiguity and ironic insufficiency in its application. The children make the problem more poignant by their innocent display of the vague rudiments of this sensibility, as yet untested. It is made repeatedly clear that the protagonist considers himself as "not soft." He has played it nature's way in the past, personally subscribing to the principle of the "balance of nature" by flooding gophers, purging a "generation of red squirrels from the walk and attic," and even by spraying against mosquitoes; and he knows what is the "best thing for the bird," i.e., a merciful death. Yet he cannot succumb to an automatic acceptance of this role. Thus he rails against what he considers the laissez-faire incompetence of the parent birds. Moreover, this ambivalence is reflected in his attempt to stay the flux of change by fighting to preserve his little piece of nature.

The "application" of the parable consists simply of placing man where by virtue of his acts and his dimly perceived fundamental motives he truly belongs—within the great round of nature. First, although the protagonist has been trying to "preserve" nature, his reasons and the results have been anomalous and contradictory. He has been manipulating nature to suit himself and in the process has practiced nature's own amoral methods of survival. Second, his attempt to maintain his private order is ironically offset by society's version of progressive order that masquerades as a freedom from the inexorable laws of nature. The Hahns enthusiastically explain to the civil defense organizer the proposed plans for the new building program: "For them the words 'the state' and 'expansion' seemed sufficient." Yet, earlier, when the Hahns are introduced, the protagonist remembers that "Mr. Hahn, who had an interest such as newspapers seemed to think everybody ought to have in explosions, didn't care to discuss the fallout." And when the cat that killed the bird is sighted, it is Hahn who asks whether he should get his gun

and thus continue the chain of violence. Hahn is completely unconscious of his identity with the "fish," even when he is faced with the human need for "civil defense."

The story, however, is not simply a demonstration of the naturalistic status of man; Powers, for whom man has always been a good deal more than another creature, has always avoided deterministic oversimplification. Although "Look How the Fish Live" perhaps comes closest of all his stories to overt despair over the human condition, this despair is expressive of the recognition of "God-given limitations" in the exercise of compassion itself. Reality being what it is, "a man simply couldn't compassionate with life to the full extent of his instincts and opportunities," and keep himself intact. This is the lesson, the "secret of their success" in maintaining survival, the dove parents pass on to the protagonist when they make no effort to help the young bird. Its plight is beyond their control. And yet this lesson is painful to man, for the condition of disorder itself breeds compassion or at least the impulse to protest: "Compassion for the Holy Family fleeing from Herod was laudable and meritorious, but it was wasted on soulless rabbits fleeing from soulless weasels. Nevertheless it was there just the same, or something very like it." At the conclusion of the story, before the protagonist enters his "doomed house," leaving the night to the bats and owls, he puts a large stone on the bird's grave, "not as a marker but as an obstacle to the cat if it returned. . . ." Not an act of sentiment, which would have reflected self-pity as well as a presumptuous assertion of self, but a gesture of opposition within his limits, a necessary moral stance. In this respect, he is "soft." When Hahn earlier suggests shooting the cat, he rejects this solution: "No. It's his nature." But this statement of a distressing truth is far different in its implications from Mrs. Stoner's expression of it. Mrs. Stoner, who is fiercely and aggressively engaged in the struggle for self-assertion, speaks as a combatant, from the field of battle. The protagonist of "Look How the Fish Live" speaks from the higher position of at least temporary withdrawal which permits a clear view of the deployment of the opposing forces.

Didymus of "Lions," in striving for identification with divinity, discovers himself tied fast to the corporeality of nature. The protagonist of "Look How the Fish Live," in attempting

to adjust to and live by the demands of nature, is betrayed by his "divinity." Though the affirmative revelation is more dimly discernible in "Look How the Fish Live," both characters are freed by the knowledge of their unreasonable position. Both certainly are exposed and submit to the generative force of compassion. Father Firman, in "The Valiant Woman," is given his chance for such release, but he is incapable of responding to it.

* * *

It is generally agreed among Powers' readers that his most distinctive and successful stories are those that in one way or another use the Catholic Church and its clergy. Inevitably much has been written on this aspect of his work, but perhaps a summary application to Powers' body of work of the relation between order and disorder as revealed by the stories discussed above will shed more light on Powers' reasons for his choice of the Church as subject and also on the manner in which he utilizes it. The Church offers a ready-made, highly developed and organized, historically weathered pattern of order, with a full and detailed ritualism to symbolize its ideals, and a psychology of discipline. Powers, who knows his Church well, makes full use of this knowledge in his fiction. However, it is significant that Church doctrine as such is never a direct or controlling force or issue, though it obviously affects the psychology and actions of individual characters. Opposed to the Church is the "world," or disorder. The world is nature-bound. With respect to the materiality of the world, Powers has, to appropriate Henry James's phrase, the "imagination of disaster." That is, he is not beguiled by the contrived appearances of human nature into forgetting the ferocity and the terror of natural existence. But, like James, with some exceptions like "The Trouble" and "The Poor Thing," he chooses to work with the veneer of manners which masks humanity's disorder.

This setting-up of opposing forces represents a formalization of a basic paradox in reality and experience. In all the stories that use the Church there is an interpenetration of the two worlds. In fact, it may be said that they are constantly threatening to corrupt and subvert each other, one by naturalistic dehumanization and moral chaos, the other by literalistic devitalization. It is significant that this mutual corruption usually occurs within the framework of the Church and is exhibited by the clerical char-

acters: Father Burner, Father Urban, the Monsignor of "The Forks," for example. And by a sharp twist of irony, in the story "The Devil Was the Joker," where the two forces are most clearly aligned against each other, the crass, devious Mr. McMaster is in the service of the Clementine Order, whereas the idealistic Myles has been expelled from the seminary. Powers, however, is not engaged in an exposure of the corruption of Catholicism. If this tends to be the impression in some of his stories, it is only incidental. Since the Church, by its formulation of doctrine, professes to an ideal, it is thus more vulnerable to subversion. It is this consciousness of vulnerability that makes the typical clerical character in Powers so self-conscious, hypersensitive in his mundane, social round, and frequently agonized. In commenting on his "Prince of Darkness" (in a letter of September 22, 1945), Powers thus explains this side of Father Burner:

Such things as Quinlan ridiculing the money aspects of the pastoral life, as Quinlan *not* smoking and yet not being a mouse like Keefe, someone to beat down and lord over, these things bother Fr. B . . . The melting butter, later on, of course, is more of the same and refers to asceticism, Fr. B's lack of it. Priests banter about these things but they are not so far from the lives of the saints, if only through required reading, that these little marks are not very real elements in their minds.

There is no better illustration than this of why and how Powers employs his Church background. Didymus is a far different person from Father Burner, but he displays a similar psychological sensitivity to the implications of material minutiae, and he, too, is tortured by the "grossest distractions": "the bingo game going on under the Cross . . ."; the "wiping the lipstick of the faithful from the image of Christ crucified."

But, unlike Father Burner, Didymus sees these corruptive "distractions" as "indelible in the order of things . . . everywhere the sign of the contradiction, and always." Any imposed order which inflexibly attempts to circumvent or dissolve this contradiction will destroy the very reality it is attempting to control. It is in the realization of this that Powers affirms "disorder" in his works. Yet this affirmation is not a surrender to circumstance or a subscribing to the status quo. The crucial point in the Powers story comes when his character, to some

degree or other, faces up to the disorder of nature (and of humanity), absorbs its energetic existence, and, by a conscious identification with it, transcends it. This process is a subtle, obliquely administered spiritual education that is rooted in reality and nourished by the capacity for compassion. In "Look How the Fish Live," when the protagonist summarily accuses all of nature and humanity of "failure," Hahn remarks, "That doesn't leave much, does it?" The protagonist asks himself, "Who *was* left?" and supplies his own answer:

God. It wasn't surprising, for all problems were at bottom theological. He'd like to put a few questions to God. God, though, knowing his thoughts, knew his questions, and the world was already in possession of all the answers that would be forthcoming from God.

To return to "A Couple of Nights Before Christmas" and its ending. When Father John breaks the mood of "rare peace" he has engineered, he re-establishes vital contact of the characters with their disordered humanity. He, in a sense, grounds them. This "rebirth" they celebrate with the secular liquor in "Billy's bottle," which paradoxically accents their communion. All are thus taken temporarily out of themselves without being taken out of nature. In no story of Powers is there an ultimate resolution. The fundamental philosophical dilemma around which his work has grown prohibits this. And so does his conception of the role of the artist, at least in the present age. In a letter of April 3, 1947, he writes:

I weigh a theory now and then which goes like this: this country is not housebroken . . . and the savage spirits still lurk in the trees and lakes and they do not like this writing going on, and so it is harder than usual to get things on paper right, the spirits always getting in the way. Who will tame the wilderness with prose?

The artist must work with discipline to fashion order out of chaos. In this respect, what Powers finds in a fellow-writer, Peter Taylor, is apropos. In a letter of November 7, 1948, he writes that Taylor is ". . . more like me, by comparison with . . . others, in that he seems to have a few dull civilized thoughts on occasion." Yet Powers is fully aware of the risk the artist

always takes in attempting to control life. He must at all costs preserve the vitality of its contradictions, the source of his art. As he himself puts it in a letter of January 3, 1952, ". . . when you figure it out, look for the perfect angle, something that'll give you plenty of leverage, you stand to fail, having asked your passion, what you might have written with in the beginning, to wait." But perhaps what Powers says in a review of a volume of letters between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau on the relation of art and religion best sums up the dilemma in both its philosophical and artistic implications:

There is a necessary contradiction existing between the artist and the saint, a question of ends even more than means, and those two never shall meet; though when there is a little of both, in a man, or a lot of one, you might sometimes think so.⁷

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⁷ "Art, the Moon Prince," *Commonweal*, XLVIII (May 14, 1948), p. 105.

Two Bibliographies: Flannery O'Connor J. F. Powers

GEORGE F. WEDGE

Both bibliographies follow the same plan: they list (1) books, (2) fiction in magazines, (3) articles and reviews by Flannery O'Connor or J. F. Powers, (4) bibliographical material and (5) articles or parts of books about Miss O'Connor or Mr. Powers. Reviews of books are listed under the entry for the book; reprints of a particular item are listed under the entry for that item. Entries of magazine fiction are listed chronologically by the year of publication; all other entries are listed alphabetically.

A brief comparison of the amount of work done by these two authors and the amount of serious critical discussion it has received makes abundantly clear the *raison* of this issue of *Critique*. Stories of such consequence (*pace* Mr. Goyen) and such depth (*pace* the lady from New York) will surely accommodate more serious critical attention than they have received to date.

Although I cannot claim completeness for the bibliographies, I think they do come near that mark. A few brief mentions have been omitted deliberately; I trust that no major items have been omitted accidentally. Mr. Schneider and Miss O'Brien of the *Critique* staff, and Mrs. Martha Stevens of the University of Kansas library have been particularly helpful, as have the staffs of the University of Minnesota and the University of Kansas libraries and of the Lawrence Public Library. Finally, I am most grateful to Miss O'Connor and Mr. Powers for consenting to look over the bibliographies and for making suggestions about where to find the more elusive items.

Flannery O'Connor

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J. F. Powers

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